

“Strange and Lamentable News”:
True Crime and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern
England

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Abstract

This dissertation examines popular literary representations of domestic crime in Elizabethan and Stuart England (*circa* 1558-1649), exploring the ways real-life scandals were torn from the headlines to address contemporary anxieties about gender roles, treason, obedience, and the analogical framing of the household as “a little commonwealth.” In a period of sociocultural and religious upheaval, disruption at this most local level threatened broader political ideologies. Ballads, murder pamphlets, and theatrical tragedies viewed instances of familial violence as a reflection of concerns about the home as a microcosmic state. Stories of domestic bloodshed expose occluded anxieties about these institutions’ stability. This project traces the public fascination with such crimes, including fears about “petty traitors” who usurped their husbands’ power, the “unnatural” mothers who murdered their offspring, and seventeenth-century preoccupations with husbands and fathers who abuse their God-given authority to become household tyrants.

The adulterous Alice Arden’s frustrated bid for personal and sexual agency in *Arden of Faversham*, Margaret Vincent’s misguided efforts to save her children from a sinful world in *A Pittiless Mother*, and the feckless patriarch’s potential ruin of his ancestral “house” in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* reflected deep-seated insecurities about a system that purported to be the bedrock of early modern society but (then as now) could prove all too fragile in practice. The concept of the family as the quintessential social building block remains

remarkably durable, and violent domestic crimes threatening that primacy continue to elicit both existential horror and prurient curiosity. The persistent appetite for tales of dysfunctional homes has long provided consumers with both *Schadenfreude* and the comforting realization that however troubled their own families may be, they have not yet taken arms against their loved ones. The exposure, containment, and punishment of those who disrupt this fundamental institution offer a restoration of order along with the reassurance that such wives, husbands, mothers, and fathers are anomalies, partially allaying audiences' primal fears about their most trusted, cherished relationships and their own capacity to commit harm.

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For Lucy

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Introduction

This project began with an accidental discovery and a spark of recognition. In the course of researching texts for my oral examination, I stumbled upon the story of Margaret Vincent, a seventeenth-century mother who killed her two young children in an effort to save their souls. The anonymously authored 1616 pamphlet, *A Pittilesse Mother That at One Time Murdered Two of Her Own Children at Acton, etc.*, recounts a sad and troubling tale, replete with familiar early modern themes including spousal disobedience, papist superstition, diabolic interference, and a perpetrator who confesses and ultimately repents before being sentenced to execution. But there was another, nagging familiarity to the narrative, and after some thought I remembered a strikingly similar crime that had taken place more than a decade before I read about the Vincent case. In 2001, an evangelical Christian named Andrea Yates drowned her children in the bathtub of her Texas home, in the belief that she was sending their souls to heaven and driving Satan from the world. There were numerous parallels between the two cases: neither Vincent nor Yates had been involved in any previous crimes or scandals, but both had exhibited signs of spiritual or mental instability. Vincent had “disobediently” insisted her family convert to Roman Catholicism; Yates had stopped taking the medication prescribed for her post-partum depression and (later) psychosis without medical authorization. Additionally, both women planned their children’s murders carefully, waited until their husbands were away from home to commit them, invoked diabolical forces to explain their actions, and initially claimed to feel no remorse.

The correlation between the Vincent and Yates murders disturbed and fascinated me, not least because the narratives featured conventionally “good,” married, middle-class mothers, both of whom were reviled in the popular press of their respective times as unnatural, monstrous, and guilty of crimes against nature and their husbands, as well as their offspring. It is important to note that infanticide became its own criminal category in the early modern period via the 1624 Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children: a legal change enacted in direct response to the crime’s association with unwed mothers. The women prosecuted under this Act were typically poor, lacking in support or resources, and desperate to avoid scandal and shame; given the social opprobrium attached to bearing a bastard child, such crimes were tragic but understandable. More intriguing is the married “gentlewoman of good parentage,” in a socially respectable and financially secure position, who chooses to kill her children for what she perceives as their own good.¹ As I compared these historically distant but irresistibly linked instances of maternal infanticide, I began to wonder how many other Margaret Vincents might be lurking in popular early modern literature, which led to a broader curiosity about contemporary representations of domestic violence.

In approaching this topic, I began with a series of questions. Why did people in early modern England abuse or kill close family members, and how did they characterize their motivations for doing so? Which crimes drew the most public

¹ Anonymous. *A Pittilesse Mother That at One Time Murdered Two of Her Own Children at Acton, etc.* London: 1616. Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online. <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

notice, and how were they represented and interpreted in the available forms of media? Did the types of crimes reported in pamphlets, ballads, and theatrical adaptations remain consistent, or did appetites and interests change over time? How did these generic forms influence and differ from one another in their treatments of the subject matter? What did the overwhelming majority of cases feature protagonists from the “middling” classes? What cultural work did literary appropriations of true crimes perform? Were they merely meant as lurid entertainments; the equivalent of sensational modern films “based on a true story”? Did they serve a didactic, cautionary function, warning readers and audiences to abjure the path of criminals who fell victim to lust, avarice, anxious masculinity, financial insecurity, or dark supernatural forces? In an era when popular political theology analogized both the state and the household as a healthy body with the sovereign (whether national or domestic) as its head, what did it mean when that paradigm was challenged, disrupted, or overthrown? Did the gradual shift from textual representations of murderous wives and mothers to tyrannical husbands and fathers constitute a literary leakage of apprehensions about the current ruler’s approach to sovereignty? Did the subversion of political hierarchies being contemplated by middle-class householders create a more pressing need to reify the patriarchal *status quo* and prevent insurrection at home? This dissertation endeavors to answer these questions by tracing the public appetite for bourgeois domestic crime from Elizabethan fears about “petty traitors” who seize power by killing their husbands through Jacobean and Caroline preoccupations with domestic rulers who abuse their putatively God-

given authority.

Sandra Clark writes that “news is not a neutral or objective concept, through whatever medium transmitted; it is a construction which exists in oblique relation to actual events.”² The reception, appropriation, and dissemination of domestic murder narratives in the early modern period were informed by a complex array of agendas. On the one hand, such crimes were, then as now, relatively rare; on the other, their representation in prose accounts, ballads, and theatrical adaptations created the impression that what Frances Dolan memorably termed “dangerous familiars” in the home posed a credible threat to the established order. In a society that embraced the proposition that a well-governed household was a microcosm of a well-governed state, the potential for household insurrection or tyranny was frightening and compelling, and the crimes that garnered popular attention are noteworthy for the contemporary preoccupations they reflect. As Clark goes on to observe,

...only certain types of crime become news: the bias towards the crime of murder resulted in an over-representation, which still exists. In that period, the murder of spouses was disproportionately highly represented. Crime news typifies the preference of all news writing for the deviant over the normal; it rejoices in what is sensational, exploiting the elements of deviance in what is constructed as criminal behavior. The news values inherent in the activities of ‘people who depart from their expected roles,’ particularly apply to the subject of women who participate in criminal activity, especially so in early modern England, where gender roles were narrowly prescribed.³

Putatively factual printed accounts of domestic crimes appeared as ballads and in

² Sandra Clark, *Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1.

³ *Ibid.* 2.

pamphlet form, with the latter often billed as the “true relation” of events. Randall Martin notes that “most news reports and ballads about non-aristocratic felons were published anonymously and/or in digest compilations,” but there were also authors such as Henry Goodcole, a seventeenth-century divine who became “the first English writer to establish a reputation as an authority about real crime.”⁴ Goodcole’s visits to Newgate prison, where he ministered to the condemned and heard their dying confessions, provided him with fodder for publications with titles such as *The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch* (1621); *The Adultrresses Funerall Day: in flaming, scorching, and consuming fire* (1635); *Nature’s Cruel Step-Dames; or, Matchless Monsters of the Female Sex* (1637), all of which feature lurid woodcut illustrations designed to appeal to readers’ morbid curiosity.⁵

Clark observes that news of domestic scandals “seemed to belong so essentially to an earlier culture of orally communicated gossip that its translation into printed form required justification: writers had to make a case for the medium by stressing its advantages” in terms of the written word’s superior reliability to more informal versions of events.⁶ Whereas ballads tend to ventriloquize their subjects’ final confessions and/or penitent scaffold speeches (usually at some length), the narrators of prose pamphlets adopt an external perspective. Their title pages “and the preambles which introduce their subjects, suggest a desire to

⁴ Randall Martin “Henry Goodcole, Visitor of Newgate: Crime, Conversion, and Patronage” (*The Seventeenth Century*, 20:2, 2005): 153.

⁵ Although the precise number of Goodcole’s publications remains unknown, he was clearly a master of the genre, and a pioneer in terms of putting his own name on accounts of true crime and their perpetrators’ confessions.

⁶ Clark 15.

create an acceptable space for their writing, testifying to an awareness that it may be perceived as impertinent or intrusive. A common tactic is to begin by locating the text within a tradition of moralistic commentary.”⁷ The author’s self-exculpatory impulse often takes the form of first explaining the necessity of relating such terrible events (for the good of the individual reader and society in general), and then vilifying their subjects in the most salacious terms. For example, an infanticidal mother is “a ravenous Wolfe” who has a “hellish fire kindled in her breast,” but if this “unnaturall cruell Beaste in womens shape” can be made to repent, these narratives often close on a pious note of possible redemption for the criminal in the life to come.⁸

Unlike their printed counterparts, theatrical appropriations of real-life crimes had the material advantage of verisimilitude, which entailed massaging the facts for dramatic effect and putting words into the characters’ mouths to reanimate them for the stage. In the majority of cases, the crimes adapted for playhouse audiences feature adulterous petty traitors who murder their husbands or unhinged petty tyrants who abuse and/or kill their dependents. Infanticidal mothers, however, are conspicuous by their absence from domestic drama. As Clark notes:

Both extant and lost domestic plays support the view that women’s involvement in murder was the main form of criminality to be staged; but while ballads and pamphlets depict women in the role of child-killers, this situation, though depicted in minor actions in other kinds of tragedy, does not occur in domestic plays. Paradoxically, a man who kills his children can become a tragic subject, like the Husband in *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, but

⁷ Ibid. 16.

⁸ Henry Goodcole, *Nature’s Cruel Stepdames, or, Matchlesse monsters of the female sex*. London: 1637. Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

this seems impossible for a murderous mother.⁹

Tyrannical husbands and fathers represent the wrongful abuse of rightful authority, whereas the “assertive, quarrelsome, scolding, extravagant or disobedient woman was perceived as a threat to social order” and became the frequent object of popular, polemical, and religious censure.¹⁰ It is unclear why the murderous mother was excluded from theatrical spaces when other unruly females were amply represented in plays about homicidal helpmeets and destructively antisocial witches. But although these mothers were often compared to Medea in print, there are no early modern versions of Euripides’ tragedy, and so the female child-killer remains relegated to ballads and prose.

In many ways, domestic tragedy constitutes a departure from the classical *de casibus* tradition, which concerns itself with the tribulations of the mighty and matters of state writ large. But plays based on middle-class crimes engage with many of the same themes as their loftier counterparts, and viewing these homely tragedies within the context of the larger political landscape exposes them as “trickle-down” reflections of more global instabilities. Lena Cowen Orlin writes that this emerging theatrical genre “made private matters part of the new public culture constituted by the commercial stage,” but these plays were not known as “domestic tragedies” in their own time.¹¹ It was only in the nineteenth century, when the controversial scholar and critic John Payne Collier remarked upon

⁹ Clark 134.

¹⁰ Fletcher and Stevenson 32.

¹¹ Lena Cowen Orlin, “Domestic Tragedy: Private Life on the Public Stage,” in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2004), 370.

certain common characteristics among plays that “shared localized English settings, journalistic content, and unadorned style,” that dramas about middle-class domestic violence received this designation.¹² From the waning Elizabethan age through the Jacobean period and the years leading up to the English Civil War, Charles I’s overthrow, and a Commonwealth composed largely of the very “middling sort” these texts portray, plays such as *Arden of Faversham* (1592), *A Warning for Fair Women* (circa 1590), and a *Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), along with prose pamphlets like *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* (1605), *A Pitillesse Mother* (1616), and *The Unnaturall Father* (1621) grapple with similar issues of gender, authority, obedience, order, loyalty, and betrayal as those informing contemporary national events.

In his Introduction to Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed With Kindness*, Martin Wiggins posits an overarching, socio-economically generous agenda for framing the quotidian (and often sordid) domestic upheavals of the bourgeoisie as tragedies.

The plays are engaged in a delicate balancing act: tragedy’s emotional intensity is relocated away from the genre’s usual courtly setting, but the verbal sophistication which conveys the one must not be mistaken for the high style that customarily marks out the other...homespun russet on the outside but glorious tissue within, because everyone has the potential for tragic grandeur, no matter how ordinary they may be. It takes Shakespeare’s Cleopatra almost the whole play to realize that, though Queen of Egypt, she is dominated by the same passions as those which drive a milkmaid. That realization, from the other end on, is the conceptual starting point for these domestic tragedies.¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Michael Wiggins, Introduction to *A Woman Killed with Kindness and Other Domestic Plays* (Oxford World's Classics). Ed. Michael Wiggins et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008: viii.

Expanding this proposition from the personal to the political points to a number of the contemporary issues addressed in these texts—albeit in frequently occluded form—starting with the increase in popular literature about adulterous, disobedient, and murderous wives in the late sixteenth century, as the “monstrous regiment” of an unmarried, childless queen drew towards its close.¹⁴

Between 1558 and 1601, Elizabeth I executed a powerful public relations triumph by simultaneously casting herself as a secular Madonna and virgin mother of her subjects, and the politicized embodiment of the inviolable Petrarchan mistress. At the same time, the spectacle of a woman wielding political power was unsettling in a culture that viewed women as inherently subordinate to men. The analogical paradigm of patriarchal authority was subverted by Elizabeth’s refusal to marry and beget (or even name) an heir. Coming barely a century after the civil Wars of the Roses, this affront to accepted ideas about gender roles, patrilineal succession, and the stability of the nation as a whole created a predictably unsettled mood. Amid what Katherine Eggert terms the “generally respectful” pleas for Elizabeth to name a successor was a growing sense that the experiment of female sovereignty had gone on long enough, that the elderly queen had overstayed her welcome, and that her kingdom was ready for a return to “proper” order in the form of a male sovereign: “not simply the hope of having a ruler after Elizabeth, but rather the desire to have a ruler instead of

¹⁴ John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (London: 1558). Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online. <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

Elizabeth.”¹⁵ My first chapter examines anxieties about female “home rebels and house traitors” who usurp power in the domestic realm through a reading of two late Elizabethan plays based on well-known cases of petty treason. *Arden of Faversham* and *A Warning for Fair Women* feature women who conspire with their lovers to kill their husbands. These two female protagonists suffer the consequences of unbridled desire and the female vessel’s axiomatic moral frailty, respectively, and these plays reveal how female subjectivity is threateningly (if only temporarily) reinstated by the domestic revolution of mariticide.

Vanessa McMahon notes that in early modern England, “Mothers were the most frequent killers of children, and children formed the largest group of victims of female homicide,” and my second chapter examines representations of the murderous mother through a close reading of *A Pittiless Mother*, the 1616 prose narrative of Margaret Vincent’s murder of two of her three sons.¹⁶ Many child victims were born to unwed mothers, who killed their illegitimate offspring to escape social censure and punishment. Some were killed shortly after birth, while others were stillborn; whether or not the child had been born alive, disposing of its corpse carried a presumption of murder and a penalty of death. Frances Dolan notes that wives were “more likely to be pardoned as insane at the time they murdered their infants, while unmarried women were more often found sane and thus criminal and accountable.”¹⁷ The pamphlets’ comparative solicitude for

¹⁵ Katherine Eggert. “Nostalgia and the Not Yet Late Queen: Refusing Female Rule in *Henry V*,” *English Literary History* 61.3 (Fall 1994): 523.

¹⁶ Vanessa McMahon, *Murder in Shakespeare’s England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 126.

¹⁷ *Dangerous Familiars* 132.

“honest” mothers sits incongruously alongside their full-throated condemnation of the women’s actions, and it is precisely this combination of pity, fear, “unnatural” violence, guilt, and the potential for redemption that I want to analyze and address in this chapter.¹⁸

I have referred throughout to analogical thought in early modern representations of marriage and the family, and my third chapter addresses this construction’s potential for abuse through the figure of husband and father as household tyrant. Far from being benevolent sovereigns to whom wives, children, and servants should owe loving allegiance, these petty dictators misuse their authority and ultimately destroy their little kingdoms, often claiming to have done so for their dependents’ own good. By examining several literary portrayals of such men between 1605 and 1608, I will argue that these characterizations express contemporary uneasiness about “rightful” authority, the ways it could go awry, and the frequently uncomfortable tension between the sovereign body politic and the flawed, human body natural in which its power resided during the reign of James I. Moreover, I propose that the project of these texts is ultimately a conservative one, seeking to critique the flawed application of masculine authority in the real world while valorizing the fundamental “rightness” of the patriarchal, analogical model itself.

¹⁸ Ibid. 162.

Chapter One
‘Tis Fearful Sleeping in a Serpent’s Bed:
Recapturing and Containing Petty Traitors
in *Arden of Faversham* and *A Warning for Fair Women*

On Valentine’s Day, 1551, the wife of a prosperous Kentish customs official conspired with her lover, several servants, and two hired criminals to murder her husband at his own dinner table, later disposing of his corpse in a nearby field. The crime’s discovery and its aftermath caused a sensation, and the incident—including the apprehension, arrest, and execution of Alice Arden and her accomplices for (respectively) petty treason and murder—was recounted in contemporary legal and ephemeral documents, including the official version in the Wardmote Book of Faversham, the *Breviat Chronicle* for 1551, and the diary of a London merchant named Henry Machyn.¹ The story eventually found its way into Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577, 1587) and John Stow’s *Annals of England* (1592), and the apparent incongruity of a provincial domestic crime appearing in serious chronicle histories—Holinshed devotes five quarto pages to an account deemed otherwise “impertinent to this history” because of what he terms “the horribleness thereof”—suggests that this “private matter” had broader social, cultural, and psychological implications for contemporary audiences.²

¹ *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991), 134.

² Holinshed, Raphael, and William Harrison et al. “*Chronicles of England, Ireland, Scotland, and France*” (London: 1587). In *Arden of Faversham*, ed. Martin White (London: New Mermaids, second edition, 1997), 113.

In addition to its representation in legal, personal, and chronicle narratives, Thomas Arden's murder inspired the anonymous domestic drama, *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham* (circa 1592), and in 1633 a lengthy ballad appeared, concurrent with the play's third published edition. Told from the perspective of the "vile wretch" Alice immediately before her gruesome, spectacular death at the stake, "The Complaint and Lamentation of Mistresse Arden of Feuersham in Kent, Who for the Love of One Mosbie, Hired Certaine Ruffians and Villaines Most Cruelly to Murder her Husband; with the Fatall End of Her and Her Associats" ventriloquizes the treacherous wife for forty-eight quatrains, presenting her as both penitent and keenly aware of the "horribleness" of the deed that made her "unto the world a scorne / And to my friends and kindred all a shame, / Blotting their blood by my unhappy name."³

That this suburban bourgeois crime remained sufficiently relevant to stimulate fresh literary interpretations more than eighty years after it occurred attests to its resonance in the popular imagination. The troubling female subjectivity emblemized by the domestic *coup d'état* of mariticide was deeply unsettling in early modern England, and in fact such crimes were not characterized as simple murder, but as *petit* or "petty" treason.⁴ In a nation where "90 per cent of those

³ "The Complaint and Lamentation of Mistresse Arden of Feuersham in Kent, etc." (London: 1633). In Sandra Clark, *Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 212.

⁴ "petit or petty treason, *n.* treason against a subject; *spec.* the murder of one to whom the murderer owes allegiance, as of a master by his servant, a husband by his wife, etc." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

<https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/advancedsearch>

reaching adulthood in the sixteenth century...and more than 80 per cent in the seventeenth century...embarked on the adventure of marriage,” wedlock was the normative condition for adults, giving the figure of the homicidal helpmeet an imaginative power far beyond any danger she realistically posed.⁵ As Catherine Belsey writes:

The existing historical evidence gives no reason to believe that there was a major outbreak of women murdering their husbands in the sixteenth century. What it does suggest, however, is a widespread belief that they were likely to do so. The Essex county records for the Elizabethan period, for instance, reveal no convictions for this crime, but they list several cases of frightened husbands seeking the protection of the courts...The records of the ecclesiastical courts in the same county include two cases, both in 1597, of men who refused to live with their wives for fear they would be murdered by them.⁶

These masculine anxieties about domestic partners becoming “home-rebels and house-traitors” are symptomatic of more global concerns about the state of the family, the family as a microcosm of the state, and the need to reinforce the domestic *status quo*. This urge to neutralize and rehabilitate the threat embodied by women who ventured outside prescribed patriarchal boundaries found expression in popular literature, which sought to contain the unruly female and provide a warning to others. In this chapter, I examine the petty traitor within the socio-political context of late Elizabethan England, with particular attention to the domestic tragedies *Arden of Faversham* and *A Warning for Fair Women* (composed *circa* 1590; published 1599) and the ways this emerging theatrical genre appropriates and manipulates “true crime” narratives to allow audiences a

⁵ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 285.

⁶ Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London, Methuen: Routledge, 1985), 135.

voyeuristic glimpse of wifely violence and insubordination, while serving a conservative social agenda.

Despite the rarity of women murdering their husbands in this (or indeed any) period, when such crimes did occur they quickly became notorious. Frances E. Dolan writes, “While the legal definition of petty treason was not new...and the crime did not actually increase in this period, the representation of petty treason was a phenomenon particular to the late Tudor and Stuart periods,” and Alice Arden was not the only wife to become famous and suffer a painful, ignominious death for violently ending her marriage.⁷ In addition to plays like *Arden* and *A Warning*, the “true relation” of similar crimes could be found in ephemeral literature such as prose pamphlets and ballads, and later titles like *The Arraignment and Burning of Margaret Ferneseede* (1608), *A Warning for All Desperate Women* (1628), and *The Adulteress’ Funerall Day in Flaming, Scorching, and Consuming Fire* (1635) attest to an abiding fascination with women who kill, and a desire to see them chastised, chastened, and cast as what J.A. Sharpe terms “willing central participants in a theatre of punishment.”⁸ Many of these narratives feature scaffold speeches like the one attributed to Alice Arden in *The Complaint and Lamentation of Mistresse Arden*, and as Michel Foucault notes, these final statements are not protestations of innocence, but public declarations of guilt that reaffirm the justice of their punishment. Observing that historical chronicles record many such addresses by the condemned, Foucault

⁷ Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1994), 29.

⁸ J.A. Sharpe, “‘Last dying speeches’: Religion, Ideology, and Public Execution in Seventeenth Century England,” *Past and Present* 107 (1985), 148.

questions whether they were actually delivered or “fictional speeches that were later circulated by way of example and exhortation,” and suggests that the latter was more frequently true.⁹ If the murderous women in these narratives attempt to subvert or escape the highly gendered systems that enclose them, the texts themselves (and their male authors) are at pains to demonstrate that such defiance is both wicked and ultimately futile.

At an historical moment when matrimony was extolled in homilies and conduct books as “a little commonwealth, by the good government whereof God’s glory may be advanced...and all that live in that family receive much comfort and commodity,” the treachery committed by a homicidal wife represented an obvious threat to stability within the domestic sphere, but also to the political, economic, and psychological well-being of the greater social order.¹⁰ Stuart A. Kane describes texts featuring repentant murderesses as “the interiorized voice of State regulation speaking...through the body of the condemned...[to] carefully display

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 65. Foucault cites the case of the eighteenth-century female bandit Marion Le Goff, who was “supposed to have cried out from the scaffold: ‘Fathers and mothers who hear me now, watch over your children and teach them well; in my childhood I was a liar and good for-nothing; I began by stealing a small six-liard knife...Then I robbed pedlars and cattle dealers; finally, I led a robber band and that is why I am here. Tell all this to your children and let it be an example to them’...Such a speech is too close, even in its turn of phrase, to the morality traditionally to be found in the broadsheets and pamphlets for it not to be apocryphal. But the existence of the ‘last words of a condemned man’ genre is in itself significant. The law required that its victim should authenticate in some sense the tortures that he had undergone. The criminal was asked to consecrate his own punishment by proclaiming the blackness of his crimes.”

¹⁰ John Dod and Robert Cleaver, “A Godly Form of Household Government: For the Ordering of Private Families According to the Direction of God’s Word” (London: 1598). In *The Taming of the Shrew: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Frances E. Dolan (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996), 204.

the legal discourses, court apparatus, and punitive technologies which formulated, maintained, and ultimately claimed a prerogative to disrupt that subject.”¹¹ This need to confront, process, and defuse the recalcitrant woman’s perceived menace is apparent in the way plays, news pamphlets, ballads, and transcribed scaffold speeches lay claim to real-life scandals. By seizing control of these sensational narratives, their male authors recover the women within them: reporting, repackaging, and reinterpreting the crimes and their aftermaths, these accounts simultaneously bolster patriarchal hegemony while demonstrating the consequences of rebellion. Indeed, the criminal wives in such texts are literally contained by and even *within* men: the ventriloquizing authors of ephemeral prison and scaffold “confessions,” the narrators of ballads, the playwrights who put words into the women’s mouths, and the cross-dressed actors who portrayed them on stage all participated in a concerted public effort to enclose and control the subversive female.

This impulse to suppress the unruly woman is particularly intriguing because it is so often a recuperative one, acted upon after the proverbial horse is out of the barn. (In his 1617 homily on Christian marriage, *A bride-bush, or A wedding sermon*, William Whateley compares a dutiful wife to a “well-broken horse that seems to have but one soul with the rider, so readily doth she stop or turn or go with the hand of him that moves the bridle.”)¹² Petty treason narratives typically

¹¹ Stuart A. Kane, “Wives with Knives: Early Modern Murder Ballads and the Transgressive Commodity,” *Criticism* 38.2 (Spring, 1996): 219-20.

¹² William Whateley, *A bride-bush, or A vvedding sermon compendiously describing the duties of married persons: by performing whereof, marriage shall be to them a great helpe, which now finde it a little hell* (London: 1617). In

feature a subtext of sexual insecurity; many of the disobedient early modern wives who found their way into such accounts were “dishonest” as well as violent, and as Subha Mukherji observes, “both murder and sexual immorality were highly marketable subjects. When the two combined, there could be no better.”¹³ Moreover, “penalties for sexual sins are often discussed in terms identical with the punishment for homicide, though their legal statuses were significantly different,” because it was thought to be a slippery slope from adultery to homicide.¹⁴ Arthur Golding illustrates the link between the two in the popular imagination in *A Brief Discourse of the Murther of Master George Sanders, a worshipful citizen of London*, his prose account of the 1573 killing later depicted in *A Warning for Fair Women*, which cautions that “the steps of a harlot leade downe unto death.”¹⁵

A married woman’s infidelity was a far more serious matter than a married man’s, and it brought greater legal consequences. This double standard continued throughout the Jacobean, Caroline, and Commonwealth periods, and in 1650 an Act of Parliament made female adultery a capital offence. Keith Thomas writes that this “Adultery Act” was the culmination of numerous previous attempts to “put the full machinery of the state behind the enforcement of sexual morality,”

Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance: An Annotated Edition of Contemporary Documents, ed. Lloyd Davis (New York: Routledge, 1998), 268.

¹³Subha Mukherji. *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 102.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Arthur Golding, *A Brief Discourse of the Murther of Master George Sanders, a worshipful citizen of London* (H. Binneman, printer, London, 1573; 1577), Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online, image 14.
<http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

and notes that bills for punishing adultery (along with incest and “repeated fornication”) were put forward in 1576 and 1604, as were similar proposed acts proposed in 1626, 1628, and 1629, and at every session between 1644 and 1650, when the bill finally passed.¹⁶ That official governmental restraints upon female sexuality were deemed reasonable and necessary (and debated on so regular a basis) attests to the profound discomfort that women’s sexuality aroused, and the strength of the masculine desire to curb it. Sandra Clark observes that “crime is not just an act in itself, but a consequence of the application of rules and sanctions to behavior so as to classify some forms of it as deviant,” and a woman who invited an outsider into the marital bed transgressed in complex, multivalent, and pernicious ways.¹⁷ Beyond betraying her wedding vows, an adulterous wife chipped away at the foundations of the domestic economy: emasculating her husband, undermining his authority, exposing him to public scorn, and potentially disrupting the orderly chain of patrilineal inheritance. As Martin Wiggins writes:

Beyond its usual associations of personal sexual betrayal, adultery was despised...because it interfered with the smooth transfer of property down the generations. The usual assumption was that a son would inherit from his father, and would have a continuing duty to maintain and develop the estate...Adultery complicated this stable onward progression because, once discovered, it meant a father could not be sure whether his heir was also his son.¹⁸

¹⁶ Keith Thomas, “The Puritans and Adultery: The Act of 1650 Reconsidered,” in *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History Presented to Christopher Hill* (Oxford: 1978), 257.

¹⁷ Clark 34.

¹⁸ Martin Wiggins, Introduction to *A Woman Killed with Kindness and Other Domestic Plays*, ed. Michael Wiggins et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xvii-xviii.

The social, economic, and emotional ramifications of cuckoldry are a recurring theme in early modern drama, with betrayed husbands running the gamut from Thomas Middleton's complaisant Allwit in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*—a knowing “wittol” who wears his figurative horns cheerfully and acts *in loco parentis* to a houseful of bastards while his wife's lover pays the bills—to Shakespeare's morally and psychologically ruined Othello, whose “soul and body” are “ensnared” by doubts about his wife's virtue (*Othello*, 5.2.299). The hoodwinked or jealous husband was a stock character in contemporary humor; Master Ford's diatribe against “the hell of having a false woman” in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in which he declares, “My bed shall be abused, my coffers ransacked, my reputation gnawn at...Cuckold! The devil himself hath not such a name!” provides a fine example of how this figure appeared on stage (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2.2.276-78; 283-85). In practice, however, the experience was far less amusing. Katherine Henderson and Barbara McManus write that, “a cuckold suffered serious loss of dignity and prestige in his community. Both his sexual prowess and his mastery over his wife were impugned; he became the butt of jests and was considered unsuitable for public office.”¹⁹ Having a “dishonest” wife constituted a major liability for a man's emotional wellbeing, his professional prospects, his standing in the community, and his perceived ability to govern his own affairs responsibly.

If a married woman who passed off another man's child as a legitimate heir

¹⁹ *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640*, ed. Katherine Henderson and Barbara F. McManus (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 59.

compounded her moral transgression by threatening the family's material fortunes, social standing, and patrilineal integrity, a wife who freed herself from an unwanted or unhappy marriage through violence undermined the stability of a well-ordered, godly nation. As in Alice Arden's case, a wife who killed her husband (or a servant who killed their master) was guilty of petty treason, a crime against the state made punishable by death in the Treason Act of 1351. Under the system of "coverture," a woman became legally fused with her husband upon marriage, and remained subordinate to him "during her married life, when she is by law under the authority and protection of her husband," making her a "subject" in the marital home, without individual agency or status.²⁰ According to this reading of the nuptial contract, "the husband and wife became one legal agent...by means of the husband's 'subsumption' of his wife into himself. In this process, the wife became a *femme covert*, meaning she was 'veiled, as it were, clouded and over-shadowed.'"²¹ Indeed, as Jessica L. Malay observes, "in the strictest legal definition...the wife had no separate existence but was conjoined with her husband...a woman had no rights to any personal items, to her children, to any income, or to any inherited goods that came to her during the marriage; all belonged to the husband."²²

Given her inferior rank within the conjugal body politic, a wife's failure to exhibit the "meekness" appropriate to her station constituted a breach of personal,

²⁰ OED "coverture, *n.*"

²¹ Dolan 27.

²² Jessica L. Malay, *The Case of Mistress Mary Hampson: Her Story of Marital Abuse and Defiance in Seventeenth Century England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 4.

social, and legal contracts. Moreover, in an era when “the household rather than the individual was the primary unit of society,” wifely disobedience and its resulting disorder were an affront to the nation *and* the Almighty.²³ Lena Cowen Orlin notes how “the comprehensive logic known as analogical thought thoroughly enmeshed the fate of the state with that of each individual household,” making the rebellious wife, child, or servant an agent of discord: a domestic terrorist analogous to political dissidents and religious heretics, and in equal need of suppression.²⁴ In an ideal marriage like that extolled in John Dod and Robert Cleaver’s *A Godly Form of Household Government* (1603), a married woman should exhibit “constant obedience and subjection”:

For the husband is the wife’s head, even as Christ is the head of the church. And even as the church must fear Christ Jesus, so must the wives also fear their husbands. And this inward fear must be shewed by an outward meekness and lowliness in her speeches and carriage to her husband. But contrarily, if she behave herself rudely and unmannerly in her husband’s sight, to grieve him and offend him, she faileth in the first and main duty of a good wife, and so far shall surely come short of all the rest of the duties that God requireth of her. For if there be not fear and reverence in the inferior, there can be no sound and constant honor yielded to the superior.²⁵

As with all such precepts, the frequency and fervor with which they were reiterated in sermons, homilies, and conduct literature suggest that wifely resistance may have been fairly common, if not necessarily normative. Indeed, the recurrence of “shrewd” and “froward” women in popular texts of the period

²³ Alexandra Shepard, “Family and Household,” *The Elizabethan World*, eds. Susan Doran and Norman Jones (New York: Routledge, 2013), 352.

²⁴ Lena Cowen Orlin, “Domestic Tragedy: Private Life on the Public Stage,” in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2004), 373.

²⁵ Dod and Cleaver 206.

indicates that the spectacle of assertive female subjectivity was both present and inconvenient. The headstrong, domineering wife “violates the vigorous and persistent...cultural constructions of women as incapable of initiative or autonomous action,” and as the reign of Elizabeth I (the ultimate “woman on top”) drew to a close with no direct patrilineal male heir in sight, the disquieting specter of the murderous helpmeet attracted increasing attention and concern.²⁶

The joint marital persona implied by coverture rendered the homicidal wife complexly problematic since, according to religious and legal doctrine, she and her spouse were not only “one flesh,” but a single coherent subject. As Stuart Kane puts it, “a woman’s identity as ‘wife’ did not become coextensive with or annexed to her husband’s, but rather became discursively internalized, even cannibalized, by it.”²⁷ Consequently, a married woman could not do violence to or even separate from her “other half” without harming herself. In practical, spiritual, and rhetorical terms, a woman who killed her husband effectively committed suicide, yet without other means of regaining discrete personal subjectivity, some wives employed desperate and brutal means to extricate themselves from this corporate identity:

The emergence into selfhood through violence is precisely what we see in countless early modern texts, in which the decision to kill is a wife’s first self-owning act, in part because recognizing or asserting herself as separate from her husband is construed as conceptually violent in itself.²⁸

²⁶ Frances E. Dolan, “Home-Rebels and House-Traitors: Murderous Wives in Early Modern England,” *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 4.1 (1992): 2.

²⁷ Kane 221.

²⁸ Frances E. Dolan, *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 75.

This apparently reckless drive to reclaim an autonomous state was perhaps the most alarming quality shared by the bloodthirsty wives in early modern crime literature, and the one in most urgent need of nullification. Women like Alice Arden and others represented in these texts killed their spouses despite the likelihood of discovery, public opprobrium, and execution - a choice that suggests the plight of the trapped animal who chews itself free, regardless of the inevitable self-injury that results.

Ironically, the suicide mission undertaken by a murderous wife was among her few available routes to legal as well as personal independence, since one of the rare exceptions to the period's monolithic conception of conjugal identity occurred in cases where the woman committed a crime. "In criminal or capital matters wives were required to answer without their husbands... Thus, while men became legally both capable and accountable when they reached the age of majority, and stayed that way, women became capable while and only while they had no husbands, but were always accountable. Their relationship to the law... was paradoxical at best, and unfixed in that it was dependent on their relationship to men."²⁹ A well-behaved, obedient wife had no individual standing or rights under the law, and was unable to bring suit against another person or seek redress for grievances without her husband, but a wife who broke the law bore sole responsibility. As in cases of adultery, women who killed suffered harsher punishment than men guilty of a similar offence. The fact that petty treason carried the penalty of burning (as opposed to hanging, the sentence for a

²⁹ Belsey 153.

man convicted of murdering his wife) underscores the contradictory position of women in the early modern public consciousness. Devoid of institutional authority—with the notable exception of an unmarried queen who took pains to style herself a “prince”—the unruly, willful woman still possessed potentially terrifying psychological power.

In addition to the worrisome spectacle of female agency run amok, there is often an unsettling, if unsurprising, emasculation and/or inversion of sexual roles implied by the murder methods depicted in these texts. When women seize power they frequently do so by penetrating their husbands’ bodies, often through insidious means like poison, served at the family table as they “manipulate their husbands’ dependence on them for physical sustenance” and “transform their household tasks into the occasions of retribution and their household tools into the weapons they need.”³⁰ Occasionally the men’s corpses are dismembered and deposited in feminized domestic spaces such as privies, dunghills, and kitchen middens associated with the disposal of household waste, and it is worth noting that even food preparation—the most prototypical “women’s work”—entailed considerable violence. Wendy Wall’s evocative portrayal of the early modern housewife “Emptying and dismembering bodies when they are almost cold, trafficking in warm blood, and ripping guts from live chickens” as she “isolated and manipulated the boundary between animation and death” in the course of her

³⁰ Dolan 30.

daily routine illustrates the ordinary woman's intimate familiarity with flesh and blood, both living and dead.³¹

In other cases, husbands are pierced with daggers, knives, or similar implements, wielded by their wives or the women's adulterous lovers. Vanessa McMahon remarks that in popular ballads, "wives were usually physically able to beat and brawl as often as husbands are. In wielding a 'rod' she was literally taking on masculine genitalia and characteristics."³² When Anne Wallen murdered her husband John, a joiner, in 1616, she added insult to injury by stabbing him with a tool of his trade in his own workshop:

Then presently one of his tooles I got,
And on his body gaue a wicked stroake.
Amongst his intrailles I this Chisell threw,
Where as his Caule came out, for which I rue,
What hast thou don, I prethee looke quoth he,
Thou hast thy wish, for thou hast killed me.³³

That the death of John Wallen, whom the ballad declares "nere did any wrong to any in his life, / But he too much was wronged by his wife," is characterized as Anne's "wish" attributes a willfully malicious agenda to a woman who "[her] selfe made husbandlesse."³⁴ (The narrator does mention that "he stroke me on the eare," but only after she "cald him Rogue, and slave, and all to naught / Repeating

³¹ Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13.

³² Vanessa McMahon, *Murder in Shakespeare's England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 81.

³³ "Anne Wallens Lamentation for the Murthering of her Husband John Wallen a Turner in Cow-Lane neere Smithfield; done by his owne wife, on satterday the 22 of June, 1616, who was burnt in Smithfield the first of June following," in *A Pepysian Garland: Blackletter Broadside Ballads of the Years 1595-1639 Chiefly from the Collection of Samuel Pepys*, ed, Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 87.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the worst language might be thought,” which is presumably meant to excuse such behavior³⁵.) In the act of “making herself” husbandless, Anne Wallen also makes her *self*, although the ballad takes care to end on a suitably remorseful, cautionary note: “Then wives be warn'd, example take by me / Heavens graunt no more that such a one may be...In burning flames of fire I should fry, / Receive my soule sweet Jesus now I die.”³⁶

The threat of a mortal enemy lurking within one’s most trusted intimate was a frightening challenge to popular notions of a man’s home as his castle, and to the contemporary ideal of companionate marriage in which couples should “apply their minds in most earnest wise to concorde, and must crave continually of God...so to rule their hearts and to knit their minds together, that they be not disseuered by any diuision of discord.”³⁷ To receive so much censure in religious and secular rhetoric, the “diuision of discord” between husbands and wives was clearly a matter of concern, and in many of these texts love—or at least marriage—is portrayed as a sort of domestic battlefield. Dolan draws attention to the ways in which

The discourses of petty treason...construct both marriage and the household as arenas of contest and striving, but refuse the concept of shared heroism that Protestant discourses of marriage attempt to idealize and disseminate, suggesting instead that there will be only one winner—indeed, only one survivor.”³⁸

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Anne Wallens Lamentation” 88.

³⁷ John Jewel, “A Homily of the State of Matrimony,” in *The Second Tome of Homilies* (London: 1623).

<http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/homilies/bk2hom18.htm>

³⁸ Dolan 31.

The petty traitor's frequent appearances in contemporary literature indicate that the ultimately pyrrhic nature of her "victory" failed to diminish her psychological potency. Even more unsettling, the legal subjectivity to which her crime and conviction restored such women constituted a disturbing loophole in the putatively unified identity implied by early modern marriage: a space through which the *femme covert* might escape, however briefly.

II.

As "the earliest extant dramatic narrative of domestic murder based on a documented historical event," *Arden of Faversham* is the first English example of the genre eventually termed "domestic tragedy," but the titles of earlier (and sadly lost) plays like *The History of Murderous Michael* and *The History of the Cruelty of a Stepmother* hint tantalizingly at similar themes.³⁹ The Arden scandal established the precedent for featuring protagonists of middling social stature in domestic drama, but the story had parallels higher up the social scale, including Mary Stuart's implication in the 1567 assassination of her second husband, Lord Henry Darnley. (There are also later examples such as the 1585 Italian case involving Vittoria Accoramboni and Francesco Peretti, on which John Webster based *The White Devil* [1612], and the 1613 court scandal surrounding Lady Frances Howard and her lover, the Earl of Somerset, among others.) Yet the comparatively humble Faversham tragedy took up more space in the popular imagination than the superficial facts of the case—Holinshed's insistence on its particular "horribleness" notwithstanding—might seem to merit. This enduring

³⁹ Jennifer Jones, *Medea's Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who Kills* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), xvi.

interest in a local, relatively small-time murder is striking not only because it occurred at a time when more glamorous, cosmopolitan versions of the same story were available, but because it coincided with broader English concerns about post-Reformation religious identity, an uncertain dynastic future, the redistribution of monastic lands in the wake of the Dissolution (which played a role in the fate of Thomas Arden, who was involved in a legal dispute over the former monastic property where his corpse was discovered), and a world turned topsy-turvy by what the Protestant reformer John Knox famously termed the “monstrous regiment” of an unmarried, childless female ruler.⁴⁰

The way *Arden of Faversham* “relocates the locus of need and ambition well down the social scale” in accordance with the public interest in otherwise “ordinary” wives who subvert domestic power paradigms becomes understandable when these destabilizing socio-cultural themes are placed alongside prevailing rhetoric about the role of married women.⁴¹ Orlin observes that such narratives “played out some of the most bitter contestations of Elizabethan private life...the nature of authority in the household and its uncertain gendering, and transgressions against social order and community responsibility...may have been at least as compelling to the playgoing audience as was true crime.”⁴² With its heady combination of illicit sexual desire and

⁴⁰ John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (London: 1558), 1. Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online.

<http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

⁴¹ Frank Whigham, *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 63-64.

⁴² Orlin 368.

misconduct, economic and social class anxieties, underworld crime, bourgeois greed, local politics, violence, and public retribution, the Arden murder was excellent fodder for addressing these concerns in its own time, and provides modern readers a fascinating lens through which to view and analyze them. When Alice Arden—“descended of a noble house, / And matched already with a gentleman”—opted to replace her husband with a “cheating steward and base-minded peasant,” as the play’s Arden refers to his rival, she went far beyond simply rejecting her role as *femme covert* (*Arden of Faversham*, 1.202-03).⁴³ By enlisting her husband’s servants (and daughter, in the historical record) to bring about his overthrow and paying hired killers with his own money so she might “have [her] will,” she fomented a domestic revolution and set a dangerous precedent for other headstrong wives (*Arden*, 1.22-23).

Alice Arden was simultaneously the stuff of proto-feminist fantasy and patriarchal nightmare, setting personal desire above wifely duty, her household’s welfare, and the moral standards of her community, and risking her own life to achieve that desire. In the play, her character repeatedly scorns the fealty putatively owed her husband in terms both treasonous and heretical: Arden laments that “on [Mosby’s] finger did I spy the ring / Which at our marriage-day the priest put on,” and Alice recklessly declares that “marriage is but words” and “Oaths are words, and words is wind, / And wind is mutable; then, I conclude, / ‘Tis childishness to stand upon an oath” (*Arden*, 1.18-19; 101; 436-8). As Jennifer Jones points out, such openly seditious mockery was an extremely

⁴³ Anonymous, *Arden of Faversham*, ed. Martin White (London: New Mermaids, second edition, 1997). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

“dangerous notion for a society that relied on the power of words, particularly those of the Bible, to enforce the control of masters over servants and husbands over wives,” frequently invoking Eve’s culpability in the Fall as the exegetical reason for women’s inferior legal, spiritual, and political status.⁴⁴ By dismissing her marriage vows as so much empty rhetoric, Alice Arden flouts the laws of personal loyalty, social and cultural convention, the state, and God himself. In an even more disturbing speech following a brief attack of conscience, Alice berates Mosby as a “mean artificer” who has “bewitched” her (*Arden*, 8.77-78). She then goes on to commit both blasphemy and idolatry by way of reconciliation when Mosby accuses her of enchanting him with “spells and exorcisms”:

I will do penance for offending thee.
And burn this prayer-book, where I here use
The holy word that had converted me.
See, Mosbie, I will tear away the leaves,
And all the leaves, and in this golden cover
Shall thy sweet phrases and thy letters dwell
And thereon will I chiefly meditate.
And hold no other sect but such devotion.
(*Arden*, 8.94-95; 8.115-22)

Viviana Comensoli notes that “rather than categorically upholding the marriage code, writers of domestic drama reveal an interest in perversity and contrariety,” and Alice’s cavalier disregard for religious norms and her own marital status (arguably an early modern woman’s most defining characteristic) must have shocked and titillated a 1590s audience.⁴⁵ In fact, *Arden of Faversham* grants its mercurial protagonist/villainess a remarkable degree of behavioral and

⁴⁴ Jones 8.

⁴⁵ Viviana Comensoli, “*Household Business*”: *Domestic Plays of Early Modern England* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 16.

rhetorical license, allowing Alice to display, enact, and embody the most terrifying qualities of a “disloyall and wanton wife” while expressing what Comensoli terms “a radical discourse of desire” before finally bringing her into line at the play’s end via the standard conservative trifecta of exposure, repentance, and punishment (*Arden*, title page).⁴⁶ In addition to Alice’s freewheeling disrespect for conventional morality, the lovers’ mutual accusations of witchcraft are arresting, given the potentially serious repercussions of such language in this period, and there are also worrisome class issues.⁴⁷ The play’s ostensibly respectable, gentry-class matron encourages her servant to conspire against his master in exchange for the hand of Mosby’s sister Susan in marriage, thereby making him her own brother-in-law should their plan succeed. She also consorts with professional criminals, soliciting Black Will and Shakebag to kill her husband in startlingly familiar terms and declaring, after their first failed attempt on Arden’s life:

Ah, sirs, had he yesternight been slain,
For every drop of his detested blood
I would have crammed in angels in thy fist.
And kissed thee, too, and hugged thee in my arms.
(*Arden*, 9.67-70)

Worse yet, Alice’s assertion that “Sweet Mosby is as gentle as a king,” in combination with the latter’s demand that Arden “Measure me what I am, not what I was,” and declared intention to “play [her] husband’s part” and “sit in

⁴⁶ Comensoli 88.

⁴⁷ Among the more widely reported contemporary witchcraft cases that would have been familiar to *Arden*’s playhouse audience were the North Berwick trials in Scotland (1590) and that of the notorious “Witches of Warboys” in Huntingdonshire (1589-93).

Arden's seat" suggest a threatening degree of socio-economic self-fashioning in the class-conscious world of the play (*Arden*, 8.140; 1.131; 1.638; 7.31). Most troubling of all is her remark to Mosby that "my saving husband hoards up bags of gold / To make *our* children rich, and now is he / Gone to unload the goods shall be thine," which raises the unwelcome specter of bastardy and usurped inheritance (*Arden*, 1.220-22, emphasis added).

This last point is especially significant, since the historical Arden and his theatrical analogue share a profound interest in obtaining land, property, and status. In his commentary on the play's sources in the *New Revels* edition, M.L. Wine remarks drily that "Thomas Arden, as his name is spelled in official accounts, appears to have been one of the 'new men' of the Renaissance, one whom we should describe today as being very much on the make."⁴⁸ Master Arden received his lucrative appointment as a customs official through his wife's influential family connections, and his acquisitive zeal apparently extended to a complaisant view of her extra-marital activities that is conspicuously absent from the play. The *Wardmote Book of Faversham* relates how "Alyce the said Morsby did not onely Carnally kepe in her owne house here in this towne Butt also fedd [him] with dilicate meats and sumptuous app[ar]ell All which things the said Thomas Arden did well know and willfully did [permytt] and suffred the same."⁴⁹ Holinshed likewise mentions that Arden knew of Alice and Mosby's ongoing affair, adding that he allowed it to continue because it was in his best financial interests to do so:

⁴⁸ M.L. Wine, Introduction to *Arden of Faversham*, xxxv.

⁴⁹ "The Wardmote Book of Faversham," in *Arden of Faversham*, 161.

Master Arden perceived right well their mutual familiarity to be much greater than their honesty, yet because he would not offend her and so lose the benefit which he hoped to gain at some of her friends hands in bearing with her lewdness, which he might have lost if he should have fallen out with her: he was contented to wink at her filthy disorder, and both permitted, and also invited Mosby very often to lie in his house.⁵⁰

While this spousal *sangfroid* seems a far cry from the theatrical Arden's anguished lament, "Can any grief be half so great as this?" there are indications that the dramatized character's behavior is not untouched by the greed and opportunism that drove the historical Arden (*Arden*, 1.19). Early in the play, an aggrieved neighbor named Greene pays a call on Alice to complain of his financial hardship after the land he had formerly leased was granted to Arden, rendering his own long-standing claim void:

Pardon me, Mistress Arden; I must speak,
For I am touched. Your husband doth me wrong
To wring me from the little land I have.
My living is my life, and only that
Resteth remainder of my portion.
Desire of wealth is endless in his mind,
And he is greedy-gaping still for gain;
Nor cares he though young gentlemen do beg.
So he may scrape and hoard up in his pouch.
(*Arden*, 1.468-77)

This episode—along with the plight of the dispossessed Dick Reede, whose "fair entreaties will not serve, / Or make no battery in [Arden's] flinty breast"—have their parallels in the historical record, where the doomed Thomas comes across as more a Tudor Ebenezer Scrooge than a shamefully abused gentleman "most wickedly murdered" by a wanton and malicious wife (*Arden*, 8.7-8; title page).⁵¹

⁵⁰ Holinshed 113.

⁵¹ "The Wardmote Book of Faversham" 161.

We know that Arden owed his professional position to Alice's stepfather, Sir Edward North, who had been appointed to the Court of Augmentations by Henry VIII. This administrative body was established in the late 1530s to redistribute Church property confiscated during the Dissolution of the monasteries, and as Jones remarks, "there can be no doubt that [Arden] became rich from these church lands. Arden's greed for property and his disregard for the welfare of former tenants on the land...seems to have some historical grounding."⁵² As a result of Alice's connections, Thomas Arden's marriage brought him preferment, land belonging to the former Faversham Abbey, and a large, well-appointed house. Furthermore, his wife's lover, with whom she had the "chance to fall into familiarity" some years before, served in Sir Edward's household, and Arden apparently found this combination of factors sufficient to make him "wink at her filthy disorder."⁵³ It is striking that while the historical murder victim seems to have been an archetypal wittol, untroubled by his wife's infidelity so long as he retained access to her fortune, property, and influential "friends," the play text is at pains to place Alice's "filthy lust" center stage, and to make her open insubordination a source of suffering to an Arden portrayed as relatively sympathetic, if feckless. In a further humanizing move, the play's cuckolded husband—a man whose "social elevation is deflated by sexual rejection," in Frank Whigham's memorable phrase—is given an unhistorical confidant named Franklin, to whom he confides his sorrow at Alice's perfidy.⁵⁴ Franklin reinforces

⁵² Jones 5.

⁵³ Holinshed 113.

⁵⁴ Frank Whigham, *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama*

contemporary stereotypes about the inevitability of wifely infidelity by urging his “sweet friend” to accept his lot, since “it is not strange / That women will be false and wavering,” and helpfully observing that Alice may yet “amend, and so your griefs will cease; / Or else she’ll die, and so your sorrows end” (*Arden*, 1.20-21; 4.21-23).

The *Arden* playwright makes another noteworthy departure from his primary chronicle source by eliding a detail on which Holinshed discourses at some length:

This one thing seemed very strange and notable touching Master Arden, that in the place where he was laid, being dead, all the proportion of his body might be seen two years after and more so plain as could be, for the grass did not grow where his body had touched, but between his legs, between his arms, and about the hollowness of his neck, and round about his body.⁵⁵

The chronicler writes that this phenomenon was thought to result from Arden having “most cruelly taken” the former Abbey field from dispossessed former tenants upon acquiring it, and the marginal note reads: “God heareth the tears of the oppressed and taketh vengeance: note an example in Arden.”⁵⁶ By contrast, this “verie strange and notable” detail receives only a brief mention in the play’s Epilogue, the only time (aside from the aggrieved tenant’s appearance in Scene 8) we hear about the “force and violence” of Arden’s dealings:

Arden lay murdered in that plot of ground
Which he by force and violence held from Reede:
And in the grass his body's print was seen
Two years and more after the deed was done.
(*Arden*, Epilogue, 9-13)

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 66.

⁵⁵ Holinshed 122.

⁵⁶ Holinshed 123.

These changes constitute an important function of the generic shift from chronicle history to drama, downplaying Arden's economic motivation for "winking" at Alice's affair and replacing it with an emotional vulnerability lacking in the prose accounts. In doing so, *Arden of Faversham* renders a narrative rooted in practical, finance-driven *Realpolitik* comprehensible according to familiar dramatic tropes. The deceived husband is now an abused Everyman (or at worst the butt of what Dolan calls "an extended cuckold joke"), rather than a cynical *arriviste* with an eye for the main chance who fails to control his wife as a husband should.⁵⁷ The play performs a similar maneuver by making Alice's adulterous relationship a passionate—albeit doomed—affair rather than the tawdry fling with a "black, swart man, servant to the lord North" Holinshed describes, and putting her squarely in charge.⁵⁸ As Jones observes, "Through her characterization as a dominant and domineering force, Alice is shown controlling others, compelling them to do her bidding. Though many participate in the murder, it is Alice's ungovernable passion that kills Arden," making her willfulness to blame for the tragedy, rather than Arden's greed, moral weakness, and ineffective leadership.⁵⁹

III.

The generic hybridity on display in *Arden* is a distinguishing feature of domestic tragedies, which frequently manipulate their source material to reinforce the conventional roles of "wronged husband," "adulterous wife," and "unworthy

⁵⁷ Dolan 36.

⁵⁸ Holinshed 113.

⁵⁹ Jones 7.

lover” via an emerging theatrical mode that catered to the contemporary taste for plays based on true crimes, while gesturing backwards to medieval dramatic forms that privileged broad moral strokes with minimal individuation. This crossbreeding is symptomatic of a larger dramaturgical shift in the latter half of the sixteenth century, as English plays gradually transitioned from an older, metaphorical approach to the more naturalistic style found on Elizabethan and Jacobean stages. As Dolan puts it, “in their oscillation between the old and the new, the hybrid dramatic forms of the sixteenth century...provide the perfect vehicles for competing, irreconciled interpretations of the events depicted.”⁶⁰ During this period of flux, plays appeared that straddled the line between the abstract and the concrete; John Bale’s allegorized Reformation-era history, *King Johan*, is an early example. Sandra Clark asserts that even the emblematic dumb show “enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the 1590s, and may not necessarily have been perceived as archaic or simplistic,” a claim supported by the success of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, which features the murdered Don Andrea’s Ghost and the personification of Revenge.⁶¹ Domestic tragedies exemplify the stylistic “oscillation” to which Dolan refers via their efforts to render sensational “real life” events legible in familiar theatrical terms while delivering a timely (yet entertaining) message about contemporary social issues.

This generic fluidity informs *Arden of Faversham*, which— despite the play’s claim to be a “naked tragedy, / Wherein no filed points are foisted in / To make it

⁶⁰ Frances E. Dolan, “Gender, Moral Agency, and Dramatic Form in *A Warning for Fair Women*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 29.2 Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (Spring, 1989): 202.

⁶¹ Clark 124-25.

gracious to the ear or eye”—repackages the characters and their motivations, placing its lurid subject matter firmly within familiar dramaturgical tropes in order to entertain playgoers while illustrating the consequences of the dangerous behaviors represented (*Arden*, Epilogue, 14-16). This hybrid quality is even more apparent in *A Warning for Fair Women*, a play that dramatizes an infamous Elizabethan case of petty treason by alternating “realistic” scenes of a scandalous historical event with elements of the morality tradition. These include an Induction by the figures of History, Comedy, and Tragedy, between-act dumb shows featuring personifications of Lust, Chastity, and Murder, and an Epilogue in which Tragedy praises “the lances that have sluiced forth sin, / And ripped the venomed ulcer of foul lust” in the foregoing “true and home-born tragedy” (*A Warning for Fair Women*, Epilogue, 1-2, 12).⁶²

The ostensible goal of chronicle histories was to provide a fact-based “true relation” of important events, but the plays they inspired employ a variety of formal approaches to serve a more diverse, if related agenda. Martin White notes that domestic tragedies are largely “concerned with precisely the same issues of rule, legitimacy, and national identity as that other great genre of the 1590s, the English chronicle history play.”⁶³ The figure of History refers to this contemporaneity while ceding the stage in *A Warning for Fair Women*: “And, Tragedy, although to-day thou reign, / To-morrow here I’ll domineer again,” and there is considerable ideological overlap between these dramatic forms, both of

⁶² Anonymous, *A Warning for Fair Women* (Classic Reprint), ed. A.F. Hopkinson (Hong Kong: Forgotten Books, 2012). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶³ Martin White, Introduction to *Arden of Faversham*, ed. Martin White (London: New Mermaids, second edition, 1997), xv.

which re-enact and interpret important and/or troubling events in the real world via the public spectacle of the stage (*A Warning*, Induction, 81-82). Frank Whigham contends that “*Arden of Faversham* is a history play,” given its concern with private affairs influenced by the period of socioeconomic flux surrounding the Dissolution, which he terms (with some justification) “perhaps the single most direct source of the whirlwind of social mobility that marked early modern England.”⁶⁴ While I cannot wholeheartedly embrace Whigham’s generic assessment of *Arden*, domestic tragedies do share the histories’ objective as characterized in Thomas Nashe’s *Defence of Plays*, to “show the ill success of treason, the fall of hasty climbers, the wretched end of usurpers, the misery of dissension, and how just God is evermore in punishing of murther,” although they do so in a more homespun, “middling” context.⁶⁵

Household dramas bring historical (and occasionally supplementary ahistorical) characters to recognizable human life, allowing them to “speak” their piece “in open presence,” in much the same way as history plays.⁶⁶ But where the histories treat exalted subjects as examples for “these degenerate effeminate days of ours,” domestic tragedies re-animate subversive characters from the more recent past to serve as familiar cautionary figures for an equally “domestic” audience.⁶⁷ Comensoli notes how the playwright Thomas Heywood, in his *Apology for Actors* (1612), “employs the double meaning of domestic in his

⁶⁴ Whigham 63, 67 (emphasis added).

⁶⁵ Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penniless, His Supplication to the Devil* (London: Printed by Abell Jesses, 1592), 30.

http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Nashe/Pierce_Penillesse.pdf

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

description of ‘our domestick hystories’ as a form of drama drawing on English subjects and on ‘domesticke, and home-borne truths,’” and this view of the “domestic” applies particularly to plays dealing with bourgeois familial crimes that would not rate inclusion in a “real” history.⁶⁸ By applying the conventions of the Elizabethan history play and the earlier morality tradition to such “home-borne” subjects, these dramas present what Ariane M. Balizet terms “a crisis of the domestic...emblemized by the violent disruption of order within middle-class, Protestant, English families.”⁶⁹ Domestic tragedy’s representation of “ordinary” households plunged into chaos offers a compelling spectacle in which the onstage characters suffer the same weaknesses and temptations as their audiences, accompanied by the comforting certainty that order will be safely restored before the Epilogue.

This complex didactic agenda is readily apparent in *Arden*: for all the verbal bravado, radical notions of self-determination, and personal, emotional, and sexual agency with which she is invested, Alice Arden remains a subordinate subject in the eyes of the law and the broader contemporary English worldview. In the end, her domestic mutiny is suppressed: the petty traitor is neutralized, restored to her proper place, and ultimately reduced to the stock character of sinful but repentant woman. In the final scene, Alice retains none of her former revolutionary swagger; with no further interest in “worldly things,” her only remaining desire is to “meditate upon my saviour Christ” and “Let my death make

⁶⁸ Comensoli 3.

⁶⁹ Ariane M. Balizet, *Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama: Domestic Identity on the Renaissance Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 9.

amends for all my sins” (*Arden*, 18.9–10.33). Thus, *Arden of Faversham* performs a recreational, admonitory, and recuperative function by depicting unregulated feminine will, its consequences, and its ultimate futility, even in a nation ruled by a woman who permanently eschewed matrimony. For the Arden playwright and his audience, female sovereignty remained conceptually “repugnant to nature; contumely to God, a thing most contrary to his revealed will and approved ordinance; and...the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice” despite—or because of—the realities of the Elizabethan state.⁷⁰

IV.

McMahon writes that in early modern England, “Women were the metaphoric epitome of both order and disorder...potent images in the arena of power and control. When she ruled, a woman was presented as creating a nightmare world-turned-upside-down,” and the necessary regulation and “ordinance” of women was a frequent topic of polemical discourse.⁷¹ A man who lost control of his household risked being judged unfit for his position as its head, and women were held strictly accountable to their husbands (or fathers, brothers, or other male relatives while unmarried) for all of their public and private activities, and were also subject to constant scrutiny by the greater community. The quotidian reality of this surveillance, whether at home or abroad, is reflected in dramas based on domestic crimes, lending a voyeuristic thrill to their presentation of real-life characters engaged in private, clandestine, and immoral activities.

⁷⁰ Knox 17.

⁷¹ McMahon 71.

This dynamic is at work throughout *Arden*, where Alice must employ the local innkeeper as a go-between since Mosby “loves me well, but dares not come / Because my husband is so jealous. / And these, my narrow-prying neighbours blab, / Hinder our meetings when we would confer” (*Arden*, 1.133-36). The murder itself is conducted under the pretext of a friendly evening’s entertainment, and Holinshed reports how, after the killers dispose of Arden’s corpse, the remaining company “play[ed] on the virginals, and they danced, and she with them, and so seemed to protract the time,” lest people living nearby should think anything amiss.⁷² Community observation and interference play a much more substantial role in *A Warning for Fair Women*, the 1590s dramatization of London merchant George Sanders’ 1573 killing by his wife’s lover, an army captain named George Browne. The murderer in this case was assisted by a neighbor, Anne Drury, and her servingman, “Trusty Roger” Clement, and like the Arden case, the crime was recorded in chronicles and popular texts alike. John Stow’s retelling influenced prose accounts by Arthur Golding and Anthony Munday, and inspired at least one ballad in addition to the anonymous play. The chronicler relates how Browne “cruelly murdered” Sanders and a manservant named John Beane “by the instigation of Mistress Drury, who had promised to make a marriage between him and Mistress Sanders (whom he seemed to love excessively),” only to be captured, tried, and executed with his several accomplices.⁷³

⁷² Holinshed 119.

⁷³ John Stow, from *Annales, or a Generale Chronicle of England*, in *A Warning for Fair Women* (Hong Kong: Forgotten Books, 2012), 124-25.

The condemned included Sanders' widow, Anne, who seems to have consented to the murder rather than taking an active role in it, and whose execution was delayed until after she "had been delivered of Child and churched (for at the time of her husband's death she looked presently to lie down)," an historical detail the play elides.⁷⁴ This omission may stem from *A Warning's* close adherence to Golding's narrative in *A Brief Discourse*, and its author's anxiety "that his pamphlet not be seen to contribute to the creation of gossip and scandal."⁷⁵ Rather than titillate his audience with lascivious details, Golding sought to exploit the murder's didactic potential by emphasizing the characters' moral trajectory from temptation to sin and thence to "a condition of hearty repentance and readiness for death."⁷⁶ The absence of Anne's last child seems important in this context since the play does include her children with Sanders, to whom she bids a pious farewell in her final scene. By allowing the audience to witness the pathos of the remorseful mother reunited with her soon-to-be-orphaned children, the play illustrates the terrible wages of sin while advancing a recuperative moral agenda that might have been compromised by the historical loose end of a possibly illegitimate infant.

Like the crime that inspired it, *A Warning for Fair Women* depicts a murder set in motion by the would-be adulterous lover (with the aid of a female "procurer") as opposed to the rebellious wife, and Anne's passive tractability contrasts sharply

⁷⁴ Stow 125

⁷⁵ Clark 124.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

with Alice Arden's desperate bid for agency.⁷⁷ Having conceived an immediate passion for his new friend Sanders' wife, Browne bribes her neighbor and confidante, an older widow, to further his suit. For the price of a "pretty turquoise," Mistress Drury will "do as much with [Mistress Sanders] / As any woman in this city can," and promptly makes good on her promise, undermining her neighbors' marriage via her intimate knowledge of their household (*A Warning*, 1.1.130; 120-21). Through her daily interactions with Anne, Drury functions as an agent of discord in the guise of a trusted family friend, and enjoys the goodwill of the house's master as well as its mistress. The same evening Browne engages her to "break the ice / That [he] may pass the ford" and gain access to Anne, Sanders entreats his wife to "Send one for Nan Drury: / She'll play the wag, tell tales, and make us merry" (1.1.173; 1.2.79-80).

The interference of "narrow-prying neighbours" in the personal lives of their fellow citizens was a commonplace in this period, especially where women were concerned, and they were not always as welcome as Mistress Drury. Contemporary texts contain frequent references to "gossips" who disrupt their friends' homes, and the feminized activities associated with pregnancy, childbirth, and the post-partum period receive particular censure. From the polemical "reformist and misogynist critique of the tippling childbed gossips" to the perennially cuckolded Allwit's complaint at the latest bastard's christening in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*—"Now the cups troll about to wet the gossips' whistles; / It pours down, i' faith; they never think of payment"—early modern

⁷⁷ Stow 126.

literature teems with disgruntled husbands driven from their firesides by chattering neighbors (*A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, 3.2.87-88).⁷⁸ These visitors are often portrayed as nosy, noisy, and greedy, invading the new mother's chamber to eat, drink, gossip, and generally upset household routines. This disruption began during a woman's confinement, and could continue through the ensuing "gander month," which David Cressy describes as "a period of physical recovery...and abstention during which...the husband took charge of domestic duties while being excluded from the marital bed."⁷⁹

In such a climate of codified social intimacy, it is unsurprising that marriages were matters of public curiosity and interest, and these took negative as well as positive forms. In addition to the ordinary festivities surrounding nuptials and the arrival of children, early modern couples could be subjected to elaborate shaming rituals that crossed the line from community surveillance to harassment. These customs, including the *charivari* ("rough music") and the "skimmington," stressed the omnipresent threat of wifely infidelity and insubordination. The former, often enacted on the wedding night, was an all male "parodic doubling" of the marriage feast, featuring "a carnivalesque wardrobe corresponding to a triad of domestic agents—the clown (who represents the bridegroom), the transvestite (who represents the bride), and the 'scourge of marriage,' often assigned a suit of black (who represents the community of unattached young

⁷⁸ Cressy 83. Cressy also notes that the Stuart physician James Primrose inveighed against the "burnt wine" and other "concoctions...specific to the womanly world of the birthroom" as "pernicious," adding a medical valence to the masculine disapproval of feminine drinking customs associated with childbirth.

⁷⁹ Cressy 203.

men)” who might cuckold the new husband.⁸⁰ The skimmington was a brutally satirical representation of marriages in which the wife was considered to be “at odds with the values of a patriarchal society: the scold, the husband-beater, the shrew,” and occasionally ended in violence and bloodshed, as when Agnes Mills, the “shrewish” wife of a Wiltshire cutler, was dragged from her house and physically assaulted by a group of costumed men armed with ram’s horns (the traditional symbol of cuckoldry), stones, and various musical instruments.⁸¹

The association of these formalized enactments of masculine sexual anxieties with marriage illustrates how the putatively “private” relationship between husband and wife was in fact highly politicized public property. The quotidian surveillance endemic to early modern communities functioned as an implicit apparatus of social, moral, and (by extension) state control at a time when people—especially urban dwellers—existed in close proximity to one another and private space was minimal. In *A Warning for Fair Women*, we first see evidence of what Peter Stallybrass calls “the connections between politeness and politics” when Browne asks Drury to “break” for him with Anne Sanders, an exchange with a distinctly legalistic tone.⁸² When Browne indicates that the matter he would discuss must be kept secret, the widow immediately answers, “I hope it is no treason you will speak”; Browne’s reply—“no, by my faith, nor felony”—

⁸⁰ Michael D. Bristol, “Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in Othello,” *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed. Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995), 145.

⁸¹ E.P. Thompson, “Rough Music Reconsidered,” *Folklore* 103.1 (1992), 5.

⁸² Peter Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Women in Culture and Society), eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), 123.

underscores the link between personal behavior and civic legislation in the popular imagination (*A Warning*, 1.1.76-77). Browne's answer is technically truthful, as far as it goes: his plan to seduce another man's wife constitutes no treason for *him*, but its success will be exactly that for Mistress Sanders when "sin prevails... / And wins her free consent" to her husband's murder (*A Warning*, 2.2.43; 45).

The externalized nature of daily life reflected in the city comedies of this period also informs domestic tragedies, which generally take place in urban or suburban surroundings.⁸³ Much of the action in petty treason texts is driven by the communal nature of daily life, and liminal zones such as marketplaces, streets, doorways, thresholds, and windows, existing at the intersection of public and private, expose female characters to a range of gazes, from friends and neighbors to casual passers-by. More insidiously, the porous nature of such spaces allows the disruption of social constraints by making women, proverbially weaker vessels, vulnerable to contamination by outside forces. Activities that occur "within doors" are ostensibly private, but as marginal spaces that provide access to the outside world, doors, windows, and thresholds are an objective representation of the illusory nature of such boundaries, blurring the lines between inside and outside, public and private, family and state. This troubling permeability threatens to disrupt modes of enclosure meant to ensure female chastity, and the implicit danger of such spaces is well represented in contemporary literature. There is the chamber door of Ophelia's song that "let in a

⁸³ Domestic plays dealing with witchcraft narratives are a notable exception to this general rule, since they are often set in the countryside or rural villages.

maid” but through which “out a maid/ Never departed more” (*Hamlet*, 4.5.53-56); Webster’s adulterous Julia shamelessly tells Bosola that had he “been i’ the street, / Under my chamber-window, even there / I should have courted you” (*The Duchess of Malfi*, 5.2.182-84); Juliet is exposed to Romeo when she “appears above at a window” from which she “breaks” like the sun (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.2-3), while Hero’s troubles begin when she is accused of having talked “with a man out at a window,” by which she is “wronged,” “slandered,” and “undone” (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 4.2.104; 106).

These few examples help to illustrate the conceptually porous nature of the boundary between public and private, as does Alice Arden’s instruction that her messenger “bid [Mosby], if his love do not decline. / To come this morning but along my door,” which creates what would have been a recognizable opportunity for her lover to breach the perimeter of Arden’s territory (*Arden*, 1.127-28). The undefined space between inside and outside plays a pivotal role in *A Warning for Fair Women*, and the first shot in the play’s domestic overthrow is fired when Mistress Drury tells George Browne how and where to accost Anne Sanders:

Watch when her husband goes to the Exchange,
 She’ll sit at door: to her, though she be strange;
 Spare not to speak, ye can but be denied;
 Women love most, by whom they are most tried.
 (*A Warning*, 1.1.179-82)

Browne follows this advice, and characterizes his ensuing encounter with “Sweet mistress Sanders, that choice argument / Of all perfection, sitting at her door” as the “entrance to my love’s pursuit” (*A Warning*, 1.3.70-71; 69). When Browne asks if she sits “to take the view of passengers,” the initially reserved Anne

rebuffs him: “No, in good sooth, sir. I give small regard / Who comes or goes. My husband I attend, / Whose coming will be speedy from th' Exchange” (*A Warning*, 1.2.31-34). As she moves to retreat to her “closet”—“If ye have business with my husband, sir / Ye're welcome; otherwise, I'll take my leave”—Browne pleads that she “let not my access / Be means to drive you from your door so soon” (*A Warning*, 1.2.45-48). Although at this point she is still “very circumspect, / Very respective of her honest name” as she awaits her husband with her “little son,” Anne Sanders nevertheless exposes herself to admiration, solicitation, potential ridicule, and unavoidable surveillance simply by sitting outside the entrance to her home (*A Warning*, 1.1.164-65).

For a married woman, speaking with a man to whom she was unrelated could prove problematic, and to permit access beyond the appropriate exchange of civilities risked compromising her “honest” reputation. Stallybrass writes that in the conceptual relationship between female verbal and sexual incontinence “silence, the closed mouth is made a sign of chastity. And silence and chastity are, in turn, homologous to women's enclosure within the house.”⁸⁴ Expanding on this connection, he notes how closely the woman's mouth was aligned with the integrity of the female body as a whole, and the house that confined that body within its circumscribed limits:

The surveillance of women concentrated on three specific areas: the mouth, chastity, the threshold of the house. These three areas were frequently collapsed into each other. The connection between speaking and wantonness was common to legal discourse and conduct books. A man who was accused of slandering a woman by calling her “whore” might defend himself by claiming that he meant “whore of her tongue,”

⁸⁴ Stallybrass 123.

not “whore of her body.”⁸⁵

Despite Browne’s claim that he lingers at Mistress Sanders’ door only in “courtesy,” Anne’s dry observation following his departure makes it clear that a virtuous woman’s response to any overture, including a conversational one, from a man other than her husband is no response beyond the demands of politeness:

These errand-making gallants are good men,
That cannot pass and see a woman sit,
Of any sort, alone at any door,
But they will find a ‘scuse to stand and prate:
Fools, that they are, to bite at every bait!
(*A Warning*, 1.2.39; 66-70)

As Dolan puts it, Anne Sanders is made “no safer from exploitation by her household or marriage, which contain without protecting her.”⁸⁶ Even at this early stage, when she is as yet “Reticent, chaste, and confined...the enclosed wife of Renaissance sexual ideology,” Anne acknowledges that “a woman...Of any sort, alone at any door” constitutes “bait” for passing “gallants.”⁸⁷ Browne is frustrated by the necessarily public nature of his “love’s pursuit,” where “Recourse of servants and of passengers / Might have been jealous of our conference,” but cannot resist the lure of Anne’s public appearance (*A Warning*, 1.3.75-76). He declares himself “taken prisoner.../ Entangled in a net of golden wire, / Which Love had slyly laid in her fair looks,” and suffers a “new inward grief” that is “cureless without help of her” (*A Warning*, 1.1.53-55; 87; 127). Moreover, the helpless passion provoked by Anne’s “fair looks” absolves him of full

⁸⁵ Stallybrass 126.

⁸⁶ Dolan 203.

⁸⁷ Dolan 201.

responsibility for his actions. In the play's final scene, Browne lays the blame for his crime squarely at her feet: "Why, mistress Anne, I love you dearly, / And but for your incomparable beauty. / My soul had never dreamed of Sanders' death," suggesting that a woman can cause chaos and destruction simply by being seen (*A Warning*, 3.4.61-63).

V.

The moral and ethical buck-passing exemplified by Browne's comments is an established thematic device dating back at least to the twelfth-century writer Andreas Cappellanus' *De Amore* and the conventions of medieval chivalric romance. The lovelorn suitor driven to commit rash deeds when unable to gain his chosen lady's "favors" remained a familiar figure in the early modern period, and male characters with agendas as diverse as Philip Sidney's heartsick alter ego in *Astrophil and Stella* and Shakespeare's Richard III blame the beauty of resistant or unavailable women for their emotional pain, economic and social hardships, ill health, and crimes including rape and murder. Manipulating, ventriloquizing, and performing the historical characters in the Sanders case, *A Warning for Fair Women* aligns them with popular literary conventions depicting frustrated lovers driven to desperation, and the women they desire as at least partially to blame. Browne is "a fine gentleman" with "such a sweet tongue as will supple a stone," but Mistress Sanders will "never send that which will do [him] good" while her husband lives (*A Warning*, 1.160; 161; 96). Like the typecasting in *Arden*, this dialogic repackaging of the murder's principal players brings the unfaithful wife, her suitor, and their accomplices under the playwright's control, reinstating

patriarchal order via the attitudes, behaviors, and language he constructs for them to enact and embody.

A Warning for Fair Women casts Anne Sanders in the role of initially unwilling (but ultimately compliant) love object, and employs another familiar literary trope in the figure of Mistress Drury, the cynical, experienced widow who is only too willing to facilitate a younger woman's moral collapse. This character—like Juliet's Nurse and Putana, the "tutores" in John Ford's *Tis Pity She's A Whore*—has deep roots in the misogynist tradition, with precursors including Chaucer's Wife of Bath, La Vieille in *The Romance of the Rose*, and the bawd Dipsas of Ovid's *Amores*. In etymological terms, the character's name would have immediately signaled the sexualized nature of her role to the audience in the now archaic word "druery/drury," meaning "Love, especially sexual love, love-making, courtship; often illicit love, *amour*."⁸⁸ On a related note, its senses of "A love-token, keepsake, gift, present," and "A beloved, prized, or precious thing, a treasure," apply to the older woman's promise that Anne will enjoy social and financial advancement by "changing" her current husband for a more prosperous one.⁸⁹ In the play's reading of the Sanders murder, Mistress Drury is not just a corrupting influence, but an agential manifestation of female sexuality, made monstrous by the power and authority conferred upon her by a foolish, lovesick man. The character Browne thinks he has merely employed a bawd to help him seduce a resistant woman, but the social, psychological, and sexual

⁸⁸ "druery/drury, *n.*" *Oxford English Dictionary Additions Series*, 1997. *OED Online*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

menace represented by Drury goes would have been readily perceived by early modern playgoers.

Anne will not be “the first, by many” Drury has “won to stoop unto the lure,” and she boasts that “mistress Sanders is young and fair, / And may be tempered as easily as wax; / Especially by one that is familiar with her” (*A Warning*, 1.3.29-33). The truth of these claims is demonstrated by her skillful handling of Sanders’ wife through a campaign of close observation and canny opportunism, in the course of which Anne proceeds rapidly from virtuous matron to willing (if not especially enthusiastic) accessory to murder. Drury uses Anne’s financial embarrassment in the “breach of credit” scene—where she is humiliated when Sanders sends a servant for money she has already promised to tradesmen, and rails at appearing “so bare and beggarly” before social inferiors—to introduce the idea of Sanders’ death (*A Warning*, 1.4.91). Citing her “matchless skill in palmistry,” she molds Anne like the wax to which she compares her with assurances that she “shall shortly be free / From all [her] troubles” by widowhood and a “better” class of husband (*A Warning*, 1.4.125; 111-12).

A widow, said I? Yea, and make a change.
Not for the worse, but for the better far.
A gentleman, my girl, must be the next,
A gallant fellow — one that is beloved,
Of great estates. 'Tis plainly figured here,
And this is called the ladder of Promotion.
(*A Warning*, 1.4.127-32)

God has “decreed” that Mistress Sanders must “be a widow shortly,” and a closer look at her palm shows that, “Captain Browne is he must marry you” (*A Warning*, 1.4.115; 172). Drury counters Anne’s initial dismay with the pious

remonstration that “to repine / Against [God’s] providence...’tis sin,” and once recovered from the shock of these revelations, Mistress Sanders accepts her apparent fate with striking alacrity (*A Warning*, 1.4.152-53). Dolan writes that in this scene, the play “briefly attempts to characterize Anne as an individual; it asks how this woman might become an adulteress and consent to her husband’s murder,” and her susceptibility to Drury’s influence is a key part of this characterization.⁹⁰ In marked contrast to Alice Arden’s fearless self-determination, *A Warning*’s petty traitor exhibits little personal will or agency, but both women exemplify their own form of moral weakness: Alice falls because she aggressively pursues her own desires, Anne because she passively accedes to the desires of others.

A Warning for Fair Women actually frames Anne Sander’s tacit acquiescence to her husband’s death as conventional female obedience. Only moments after asserting, “I am a woman, and in that respect / Am well content my husband should control me,” Anne greets the news of her imminent widowhood and remarriage to a virtual stranger with what would be admirable resignation in another context: “If it be so, I must submit myself / To that which God and destiny sets down” (*A Warning*, 1.4.89-90; 188-89). Clark writes that despite the absence of any adulterous acts in the play’s realistic scenes, once Anne acknowledges the “inevitability” of Sanders’ death, she has become “at least in her heart, a faithless wife,” and her subsequent “transformation follows the homiletic concept of the ‘chain of vice,’ whereby the soul once infected by sin

⁹⁰ Dolan 204.

becomes increasingly prone to graver and graver moral lapses.”⁹¹ The swiftness with which the play replaces the “innocent wife” with the “wicked adulteress” via Anne’s abrupt shift from consternation at the loss of her current husband to acceptance of a “better” (i.e. richer) one underscores the ways *A Warning* hearkens back to more emblematic theatrical forms. Locating *A Warning for Fair Women* within the tradition of “hybrid moralities” discussed earlier, Dolan notes how the play “censures ambition and social change by immediately associating social climbing with adultery and murder,” but Drury’s corrupt perversion of Anne’s obedience suggests that the real source of trouble is the deployment (whether conscious or unconscious) of female sexuality, and men’s helpless susceptibility to it.⁹²

In their dramatic depictions of historical crimes and their aftermaths, domestic tragedies demonstrate how a treacherous wife—by seizing control of the household, supplanting its rightful sovereign, conspiring with outsiders, and otherwise subverting the “natural” order—condemns not only herself, but also those foolish enough to follow her. For all her force of will and desire for agency, Alice Arden’s attempted *coup* fails in all its objectives except her husband’s death (which she claims to regret), and ends in disaster for everyone concerned. By allowing Mistress Drury to manipulate her with promises of a more prosperous husband, Anne Sanders loses the one she has, orphans her children, and dooms herself. If we accept Dolan’s assertion that such plays “[hold] the husband accountable for his wife’s adultery and insubordination,” then the women’s

⁹¹ Clark 126.

⁹² Dolan 202.

crimes would simply caution male playgoers to mistrust, fear, and silence their wives, since “the wife’s enlargement into volition, speech, and action necessarily implicates, diminishes, and even eliminates the husband.”⁹³ But *Arden of Faversham* and *A Warning for Fair Women* do more than this. In their appropriations of petty treason scandals, domestic tragedies contain and confront uncomfortable contemporary concerns about the slippages between sexuality, obedience, sovereignty, the family as a microcosm of the state, and the fragile nature of the state itself: all within the relatively safe context of a playhouse entertainment. By warning women in the audience to eschew the petty traitor’s path and avoid her fate, and their husbands to maintain control of their domestic subjects lest they be supplanted, these plays (acted and almost certainly authored by men) seek to demonstrate not only the wages of wifely rebellion and uncontrolled female sexuality, but also the essentially dysfunctional nature of women’s power at an historically paradoxical moment when the realm’s future stability seemed deeply uncertain, towards the end of a long and successful period of female rule.

⁹³ Dolan 36.

Chapter Two Monstrous Un-Making: Blood, Milk, Maternity, and Murder

In the spring of 1616, Margaret Vincent, a gentlewoman “of good parentage...good education...witty and of a ripe understanding...and being careful, as it seemed, of her soul’s happiness” was “(by the subtle sophistry of some close Papists)...converted to a blind belief of bewitching heresy,” and became convinced that her family’s Protestantism imperiled their eternal salvation.¹ Her husband, Jarvis, rebuffed her pleas for Roman Catholic conversion, accounting such “persuasions...vain and frivolous, and she undutiful to make so fond an attempt, many times snubbing her with some few unkind speeches.”² This spousal resistance “bred in her heart a purpose of more extremity,” and at last she “resolved the ruin of her own children...to save their souls (as she vainly thought)” from being “brought up in blindness and darksome errors, hoodwinked (by her husband’s instructions) from the true light.”³ Accordingly, she waited until Jarvis was away and on May 9—Ascension Day, or Holy Thursday—she dismissed her maidservant and “like a fierce and bloody Medea” strangled her two young sons, aged two and five, laying their corpses “upon the bed, sleeping in death together.”⁴ (The Vincents’ youngest child was “abroad at nurse” and thus survived.)

The anonymous author of the contemporary prose pamphlet, *A Pittillesse*

¹ Anonymous. *A Pittillesse Mother That at One Time Murdered Two of Her Own Children at Acton, etc.* London: 1616. Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online, image 3. <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

² Ibid.

³ *A Pittillesse Mother* image 4.

⁴ Ibid.

Mother who most unnaturally at one time murdered two of her own children at Acton within six miles of London, writes that the crime scene “might have burst an iron heart asunder and made the very Tiger to relent” but the unrepentant Vincent—“ still animated forward by instigation of the Devil”—instead tried to take her own life, “being of this strange opinion, that she herself by this deed had made Saints of her two children in heaven.”⁵

The murderous mother’s attempt to join the saints she had “made” was interrupted by her servant’s return “at the very instant of this deed of desperation,” and the tract goes on to detail Vincent’s “violent rage,” ensuing fit of madness, and shocking lack of remorse:

The next day...she was conveyed to Newgate in London. Where lodging, in the master’s side, many people resorted to her, as well of her acquaintance as others and as before, with sweet and comfortable persuasions practised to beget repentance...But blindness so prevailed that she continued still in her former stubbornness, affirming (contrary to all persuasive reasons) that she had done a deed of charity in making them Saints in Heaven that otherwise might have lived to destruction in Hell, and likewise refused to look upon any Protestant book as Bible, meditation, prayer book, and such like, affirming them to be erroneous and dangerous for any Romish Catholic to look in. Such were the violent opinions she had been instructed in, and with such fervencies therein she continued that no dissuasions could withdraw her from them, no, not death itself, being here possessed with such bewitching willfulness.⁶

A Pittiless Mother portrays a once exemplary woman “possessed with such bewitching willfulness” that she can no longer distinguish good from evil, or “right faith” from “the Devil’s temptation.”⁷ In the grip of this grievous error, Margaret Vincent collapses her own confused subjectivity with that of her

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *A Pittiless Mother* image 5.

⁷ *A Pittiless Mother* image 6.

children until the association is so “deranged, consuming, and dangerous” that no choice remains but to eliminate herself and them for their collective good.⁸ But despite the pamphlet’s censure of “this creature not deserving mother’s name,” for Vincent the earthly “undoing” of her family was wholly commensurate with the role of loving and protective Christian parent. By sacrificing the children “bred in her own body, and cherished in her own womb with much dearness full forty weeks,” she secured their most essential nurturance and safety by preserving their souls.⁹ It was only after three days of counseling by “certain godly preachers...that her heart by degrees became a little mollified and in nature somewhat repentant for these her most heinous offences” and (according to the pamphlet’s narrative) Vincent confessed she had acted “only by the Devil’s temptation” and “eternally deserved hellfire for the murder of her children.”¹⁰

The popular analogical framing of the domestic realm as a microcosm of the community, the state, and a well-ordered universe made the early modern household a place where wives and mothers held positions of simultaneous authority and subjugation, with female power exercised privately in the interests of maintaining a masculine public order. Catherine Belsey notes that in “the absolutist, dynastic meaning of marriage, women were everything that men were not: silent, submissive, [and] powerless,” but in the early modern period, Protestant rhetoric extolled an ideal of companionate matrimony more akin to a

⁸ Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1994), 142.

⁹ *A Pittiless Mother* image 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

partnership in which couples were “yoke-mates.”¹¹ This “marriage of true minds” did not, however, translate to an equal balance of power, but instead espoused the male/female, work/home, public/private division of authority that would inform the western family model for centuries to come:

Gradually the set of oppositions we recognize established the new meaning of sexual difference. Women were once again everything that men were not—this time caring, nurturing, intuitive, irrational—and their sphere of influence was precisely the newly defined place of retreat from the public world of work and politics. “Hearth and home,” “the bosom of the family”: these phrases evoke warmth and affection. They also have the effect of isolating women in a private realm of domesticity which is seen as outside politics, and therefore outside the operations of power.¹²

This arrangement gave women responsibility for establishing and maintaining order, but only within a strictly domestic context where they remained answerable to their husbands’ innately superior authority: a place for everyone, and everyone in his or her appointed (and appropriately gendered) place. But in practice the personal was deeply political: Margaret Vincent’s desire to control her family’s spiritual destiny challenged and undermined her husband’s duty not only to his private household, but to his nation’s official, public—and legally enforced—religion, making the children’s murder a profoundly seditious act. If a wife who killed her spouse was a “petty” traitor, and a husband who abused his God-given patriarchal sovereignty a domestic tyrant, a mother who killed her offspring rejected, abandoned, and ultimately reversed her “natural” role in the production of a stable and godly family, household, and community: a monstrous unmaking

¹¹ Catherine Belsey, “Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies,” in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 176.

¹² Belsey 177.

in which her material female energy intruded upon and disrupted power structures conceptualized as male. Through her destruction of what she had created and nurtured, the infanticidal mother became a peculiarly subversive amalgam of political dissident and religious apostate.

In the pages that follow, I examine the multivalent anxieties surrounding women's embodied, highly gendered capacity for generation, procreation, tender nurturance, and brutal violence in post-Reformation England. In addition to contemporary attitudes towards the fertile female body, I address the cultural traditions surrounding childbirth and the post-natal period, the perceived "shaping" capacities of the mothers and midwives who determine, pronounce upon, and ensure a newborn's chances of survival (or not), and the juxtaposition of physical weakness and cultural power associated with the parturient blood of childbirth. Throughout, I consider the damage inflicted on the body politic when women trouble, reject, or actively subvert popular notions of "the embodied home...as a body of which the husband is the head...[and] a properly governed home functioned as a healthy body" by killing its most vulnerable members.¹³ Blood circulating through a living body performs the vital functions of balancing humors and maintaining equilibrium, but once shed—particularly by the figure charged with "cherishing" that body's constituent parts—it becomes a profoundly disruptive force. In a system where a well-run household and a well-regulated state are "related manifestations of divine order," maternal violence perverts both

¹³ Ariane M. Balizet, *Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama: Domestic Identity on the Renaissance Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 54.

the idea of somatic domesticity and the Protestant homeland it miniaturizes by externalizing and exposing that which should remain contained.¹⁴

II.

The fact that Margaret Vincent's misguided attempt to save her children occurred via the "charming persuasions" of papists highlights a worrisome flaw in the analogical scheme: the weakness of the feminine vessel. As *A Pittillesse Mother* sternly cautions, "hardly the female kind can escape their enticements, of which weak sex they continually make prize...and by them lay plots to ensnare others, as they did by this deceived gentlewoman" who, the narrator asserts, "if Popish persuasions had not been, the world could not have spotted with the smallest mark of infamy but had carried the name of virtue even unto her grave."¹⁵ A virtuous, respectable matron so readily "deceived" by proponents of a forbidden and heretical religion exemplified contemporary concerns about women as vulnerable points in the body politic: portals through which pernicious forces might creep in to undermine an only superficially stable whole. It was understood that Roman Catholics sought to add to their ranks, and the pamphlet's author describes the newly converted Vincent's efforts to lead Jarvis down the same wicked path:

For she, good soul, being made a bird of their own feather, desired to beget more of the same kind, and from time to time made persuasive arguments to win her husband to the same opinion, and deemed it a meritorious deed to charge his conscience with that infectious burden of Romish opinions, affirming by many false reasons that his former life had been led in blindness, and that she was appointed by the Holy Church to shew him the light of true understanding. These and such like were the

¹⁴ Balizet 7.

¹⁵ *A Pittillesse Mother* image 6.

instructions she had given her to entangle her husband in and win him if she might to their blind heresies.¹⁶

Wise husbands—recalling Adam’s uxorious indulgence of “our first mother”—were on guard against such “persuasions,” and careful to assert sovereignty in religious as well as practical matters. As Randall Martin writes, “Obedience to male authority was...essential because women were deemed more susceptible than men to Catholic conversion. This weakness resulted from a combination of powerful Catholic insinuation and inferior female reasoning and control of unruly passion.”¹⁷ Given this axiomatic frailty, a woman’s best intentions and most positive natural impulses (including Christian zeal and maternal tenderness) could be twisted to diabolical purpose, and fears about their inherent mental and moral weakness were expressed in representations of hitherto “good” wives and mothers whose love became so perverted that they killed their children in what they believed were their best interests.

Early modern ideas about women’s moral, ethical, and intellectual inferiority were part of a well-established western tradition. From Genesis’ portrait of Eve (the prototypical havoc-wreaking, insufficiently monitored female) to the writings of St Jerome; from medieval antifeminism to Renaissance humanism (Erasmus describes women as “talkative, fickle, and superstitious”); from misogynist Protestant reformers like John Knox to the “woman-hating” pamphleteer John

¹⁶ *A Pittiless Mother* image 3.

¹⁷ Randall Martin, *Women, Murder, and Equity in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 165.

Swetnam, masculine suspicion and criticism were in plentiful supply.¹⁸ The inconsistent and frivolous nature of the weaker sex was standard fodder for sermons, homilies, polemical tracts, and conduct literature, and both sides of the Reformation divide employed the trope of the spiritually and psychologically infirm, fragile woman to serve their respective agendas. Lucy Underwood writes of a contemporary Catholic account in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Westminster, which presents the Vincent murders as the work of a female mind unhinged not by diabolic possession and/or heresy but by religious persecution: “Madness, not Catholicism, caused Margaret Vincent’s unnatural actions, and madness was the result of Protestant oppression...Where *A Pittiless Mother* insists on a premeditated murder, the Catholic report makes it a panicked reaction” to the threat of her children being removed as punishment for her “violent” recusancy.¹⁹

In this alternate reading, *A Pittiless Mother*’s cautionary “tale of papist child-slaughter” becomes the story of a well-intentioned but emotionally unstable mother made desperate by institutionalized religious intolerance:

Both reports agree that Margaret Vincent repented her actions; but the Catholic newsletter claims that... Vincent’s motherhood was violated by Protestant threats to remove her children, before she violated it by her action (the result of madness also caused by persecution). Furthermore, the Protestants would have acknowledged her lack of responsibility for the murders if she had conformed; she is thus killed for her good actions as much as her sins. For the Protestant writer, the moral is that Catholicism

¹⁸ Desiderus Erasmus, *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum comentarii duo*, ed. Craig Thompson, translation by Betty Knott, *The Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 583.

¹⁹ Lucy Underwood, *Childhood, Youth, and Religious Dissent in Post-Reformation England* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 176.

turns loving parents into monsters; for the Catholic writer, that Protestant tyranny drives burdened souls to lunacy.²⁰

But whether Vincent's crime resulted from malign influence or the pressure of an abusive state religion on a fragile psyche, she responded by destroying her children, her husband's patrimony, and the domestic commonwealth she was entrusted to maintain. These actions may have sprung from a misguided conversion to a "false" faith, supernatural interference, or from the intolerable tension between her private spiritual beliefs and her public duties as a wife, mother, and citizen in a Protestant nation. However, viewed from any perspective, the murderous mother enacts a moral, emotional, and/or mental weakness explicitly gendered as female, a designation made even more disruptive given her putatively "natural" role as caregiver.

Given the space *A Pittiless Mother* devotes to Vincent's "stubbornness" and "undutiful" efforts to convert her family, it is striking that her final words remain a mystery, an omission that complicates the restoration of "right" faith that the pamphlet implies. Underwood points out that although *A Pittiless Mother* claims she "repented her actions," the author "does not quite say Vincent reconverted to Protestantism, stopping at 'Thus she was truly repentant, to which (no doubt) but by the good means of these Preachers she was wrought unto.'"²¹ In a period and print medium that privileged such details for their sensational value as much as for their didactic function, the particulars of Vincent's trial, execution, and scaffold speech are conspicuous by their absence. Moreover, *A Pittiless Mother's*

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Underwood 238.

pathetic tone clearly seeks an emotional response from readers. It seems unlikely that a writer who relates how one of Vincent's doomed children retained a "countenance so sweet [it] might have begged mercy at a tyrant's hand" as his "fierce and bloody mother...parted the soul and body" would miss an opportunity to chronicle that mother's eventual remorse and public reckoning in equally melodramatic terms.²²

It may be that the Protestant pamphlet's reference to the "free confession" and "patient mind" with which Vincent supposedly received her judgment were generic formalities, but it is intriguing that "good gentlewomen" reading this account are urged to simply "Forgive and forget her."²³ The dismissive tone of this admonition is striking, as is the author's scathing final comment: "She is not the first that hath been blemished with blood nor the last that will make a husband wifeless."²⁴ The absence of any confession or gallows speech raises questions about why the narrator—simultaneously condemning her transgressions and urging "forgiveness"—silences Vincent rather than allowing her to speak, or even ventriloquizing a conventional expression of remorse. In its erasure or elision of her final words, *A Pittiless Mother* strips Margaret Vincent of both her voice and any lingering subjectivity beyond the object lesson of her crime and punishment. As Katherine Heavey notes, "the pamphlet acknowledges that Margaret was misled by the Devil, and...ends with a stern warning to the 'Countrymen of England' to appreciate the dangers posed by 'that dangerous sect' of

²² *A Pittiless Mother* image 4.

²³ *A Pittiless Mother* image 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Catholicism,” a rhetorical move easily read as masculine whistling in the dark.²⁵ Despite her constrained authority and limited personal agency, the murderous mother’s ability to “make a husband wifeless” (and a father childless) posed a threat to patriarchal order made only marginally less discomfiting when couched in anti-papist rhetoric. The tract’s dismissal of the individual woman behind the murders attempts to reduce Vincent to a “type,” consigning her to the long list of morally weak, headstrong women who people contemporary misogynist polemic, making her “a lesson for both men and women to learn from and resist.”²⁶

III.

Even when safely contained within her designated sphere of influence, the figure of the early modern housewife wielded substantial influence. In their capacity as homemakers, wives and mothers literally create and shape the household through their practical management of everyday domestic affairs. Women also “make” the family within that home via the somatic materiality of pregnancy, childbirth, the production of breast milk, the selection of midwives and wet-nurses (believed to permanently influence their charges) and early childhood education and discipline. In these ways, mothers simultaneously engender the nation and ensure its future prosperity; as David Cressy observes, “Without childbearing there could be no patriarchy, without human procreation no social reproduction. The woman’s work of childbearing made mouths to feed

²⁵ Katherine Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558–1688* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 154.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

and hands to work, new subjects, citizens, and Christians.”²⁷ But a negative symbiosis inheres in this social and biological interdependence. The childbearing woman manufactures “new subjects, citizens, and Christians,” but only if she performs certain actions; in order for a growing fetus or an infant child to die, a pregnant woman or recently delivered mother need do little or nothing.

During pregnancy and the post-natal period, maternal bodies nourish their offspring to promote the developing infant’s growth and early survival; after weaning comes the work of ensuring the child continues to thrive until it can feed, protect, and eventually fend for itself. But failure or refusal to perform these duties, or even simple neglect or incompetence, destabilizes the whole system; moreover, the fragility of babies and young children meant they met with frequent accidents, and could be deliberately done away with under the guise of mischance. There were many ways in which the childbearing woman’s protean, generative capabilities could be used for *unmaking*, and this capacity to destroy what she had “cherished in her own womb with much dearness full forty weeks”—possibly without detection or consequences—imbued the murderous mother with tremendous social, cultural, and psychological potency.²⁸ Naomi J. Miller addresses the early modern period’s multivalent “codes of maternity” in her essay on the speaker’s self-infantilization in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 143 (“Lo, as a careful housewife”):

In a variety of early modern texts, mothers offer the potential for both nurture and rejection, sustenance and destruction. Maternity was

²⁷ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.

²⁸ *A Pittillesse Mother* image 4.

associated with a doubleness commonly associated with femininity at the time. Whereas women in general were directed to be chaste, silent, and obedient in order to counteract the perceived power of their sexuality, mothers in particular emerged as figures who combined the sexuality required for procreation with considerable authority over their offspring, male as well as female.²⁹

Miller notes that this one-two punch of maternal authority and female sexuality was a particularly “powerful combination in a society that had marked anxieties over the positions of women,” and where mothers were “sometimes represented as Madonna and monster at once” in texts that veered between eulogizing those who sacrificed themselves for their children’s sake (the 1620 pamphlet *The Honor of Virtue* praises Elizabeth Crashaw, the poet’s stepmother, for her admirably selfless death in childbirth), and denouncing others like Margaret Vincent as “without all motherly pity.”³⁰ This perceived duality is at least partially attributable to the female body’s changeable nature, a physical incoherence directly related to that body’s sexual and reproductive functions. As Rebecca Kukla writes, concerns about women’s weirdly unstable corporeality have deep roots:

The maternal body has long been seen as posing a troubling counterpoint to the mythical well-bounded, fully unified, seamless masculine body. Female bodies and especially pregnant and newly maternal bodies leak, drip, squirt, expand, contract, crave, divide, sag, dilate, and expel. It’s not hard to see why such bodies have long seemed to have dubious, hard to fix, permeable boundaries...and have been a source of various species of intellectual and visceral anxiety.³¹

²⁹ Naomi J. Miller, “Playing ‘the mother’s part’: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Early Modern Codes of Maternity, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Routledge, 2000), 347.

³⁰ Miller 348.

³¹ Rebecca Kukla, *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 3.

This “intellectual and visceral anxiety” stretches back to antiquity, where Hippocratic medicine claimed that the woman’s central physical feature was a hollow channel called the *hodos* (a sort of gynecological Route 66, i.e. “the mother road”), which ran between the head’s orifices and the vaginal opening. Women’s skin was also believed to be more porous than men’s, which made them “susceptible to passions, [and] less protected against corrupting ingestions.”³² The female body’s shape-shifting penetrability renders it inferior to its less plastic masculine opposite, yet its ability to incubate, procreate, and cultivate life grants women power to “bridge the gap between two bodies, becoming both one and two at once through the gifts of gestation and milk,” thereby making its very instability a disquieting strength.³³ Miller observes that “The physicality of women’s bodies in the early modern period was defined primarily in terms of maternal functions and responsibilities, resulting in treatises such as Jacques Guillemeau’s *Child-Birth, or, The Happy Deliverie of Women and The Nursing of Children* (1612)...addressing the issue of female sexuality only in terms of medical concerns regarding pregnancy, labor, and delivery.”³⁴ The blithe masculine cynicism inherent in reducing women’s complex anatomy to the functions most valuable and useful to a patriarchal system is unsurprising, as is the qualified peace it makes with a troubling reality. On the one hand, female bodies were alien, unfixated, and bafflingly unpredictable; on the other, intimacy

³² Kukla 5.

³³ Kukla 1.

³⁴ Miller 348.

with them was necessary and unavoidable if the world was to be peopled, its business to continue, and its property transferred smoothly from fathers to sons.

IV.

Prevailing anxieties about women's moral and spiritual inconstancy are rendered more legible when contextualized by their physical mutability, and their disruptive potential was exacerbated when they gathered in numbers. The transition from wife to mother was a critical rite of passage, and a woman's lying-in was a deeply freighted affair in which a dangerous physical ordeal, the relief of safe deliverance (and patrilineal security), and the suspension of ordinary household routines were conflated into an important social occasion for the expectant mother and her female "gossips." This momentous event was presided over by the midwife, and the customs and culture surrounding labor and delivery were an ongoing source of masculine *angst*, taking place within a feminized space from which men were explicitly excluded. As Cressy observes, the outcomes of pregnancy and childbirth were ultimately "in God's hands, [but] under him, in the hands of women."³⁵ For the duration of a mother's "travail," her husband effectively surrendered his domestic sovereignty to the attending midwife, who controlled all access to the birth chamber and the laboring woman within. Men became outsiders in their own homes, passively awaiting intelligence from the birthing room's "powerfully gendered domain," a mysterious, transformative

³⁵ Cressy 35.

space where “every phase of the process was invested with emotional, cultural, and religious significance.”³⁶

Few men gained—or, one imagines, sought or desired—entrance to this unequivocally female realm, but the birthing room was a place of immense material and imaginative significance. The fates of families, property, legacies, communities, and ultimately the nation itself were determined by what occurred there, and the suspense was only broken when a woman emerged bearing news. Caroline Bicks has written eloquently about “the midwife who turns bodies into early modern subjects” and of her role as mediatrix between “the separate worlds of mothers and fathers, imagined and organized under the rubrics of nature and culture.”³⁷ Birth attendants breached this highly gendered divide via their unique ability to “deliver” vital information: was there a live child (or mother) or a dead one? If living, was it a healthy baby girl or a long-desired but sickly male heir? The midwife had power not only to announce the outcome of a woman’s lying-in, but to pronounce upon who and what the resulting child *was*: its sex, its general health and physical condition, and its chances of survival. It was also the midwife’s responsibility to baptize an infant if it seemed likely to die, although the practice of private baptism was the subject of considerable controversy, particularly when it was conducted by women.

This “juxtaposition of ‘message’ and ‘delivery’ recalls the midwife’s influential role as negotiator of the verbal and psychological work that brought

³⁶ Cressy 15.

³⁷ Caroline Bicks, *Midwiving Subjects in Shakespeare’s England* (Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2003), 2, 34.

early modern subjects into being,” and Bicks notes that the midwife’s influence was widely believed to extend beyond simply reporting on a child’s physical characteristics to actually forming those features.³⁸ Indeed, many contemporary medical texts “circulated beliefs that connected the actions of the midwife to the shape of newborn physiognomies”:

When the midwife cut the umbilical cord, for instance, she allegedly controlled the size of the tongue and genitals, anatomical sites whose proportions determined the performative success of masculine and feminine roles; and when she swaddled the malleable newborn body or pressed its head, she molded it into either a deformed or perfect figure that then supposedly shaped the infant’s fortunes and character.³⁹

Their role in “the production of subjects and succession” and perceived capacity to “negotiate the key moments at which bodies became subjects” gave midwives a peculiar cultural authority, which might easily be exploited to conspire with women in deceiving their husbands.⁴⁰ As *de facto* experts in all sexual matters, midwives were frequently called upon to judge the fitness of men’s “members,” and to determine women’s virginal vs. “fallen” states in legal proceedings (although it was also feared their “formative touch” might accidentally change maids to women during internal examinations). Confessions about a child’s paternity and/or a mother’s sexual history were thought to flow more freely under the physical and emotional strain of childbirth, making the midwife a natural confidante, and lending an additional, clandestine valence to the birthroom’s associations with troubling female homosociality. Female birth attendants were

³⁸ Bicks 34.

³⁹ Bicks 4.

⁴⁰ Bicks 5.

privity to information that could “make” and “unmake” not only newborn boys and girls, but also maidens, husbands, wives, marriages, and dynasties, and—at least in the masculine imagination—the potential collusion between midwives and mothers posed a significant threat to men’s control over their wives and children. Within a space reserved for the most intimate care of female bodies, women changed from wives to mothers, and gained the power to shape, guide, and control the well-being and the survival of the next generation.

V.

In addition to her volatile flesh – expanding and contracting, generating, expelling, and sometimes losing life through miscarriage, stillbirth or childbed mortality – the sexualised woman’s association with bodily fluids had prodigious cultural import, especially with regard to blood. Ariane M. Belizet writes that while “blood itself is not necessarily gendered, the act of bleeding *is*, and the bleeding associated with domestic rites and relationships is almost always considered feminine.”⁴¹ From the onset of a girl’s menses to the hymeneal bleeding of marital consummation, which “initiated the domestic unit and established domestic hierarchy by embodying patriarchal control over the new wife’s body,” women’s blood and the act of bleeding separated them from men, but also from their unsexualized pre-pubescent selves.⁴² Belizet presents the loss of virginity as a contract written in the bride’s own blood: “this bleeding affirms the bride’s physical, spiritual, and mental submission to her husband’s will, not just at the moment of consummation but as the most important factor of her new

⁴¹ Balizet 89.

⁴² Balizet 36.

identity as wife...bloody wedding sheets serve as evidence of a marriage's consummation and represent the bride's first task of housewifery."⁴³ This foundational association links bloodshed to the performance of marital obedience and to the conceptual identity of "wife" itself. In a culture in which sexual consummation rendered a marriage both valid and (in most cases) indissoluble, the fact that this bond was partially forged via the woman's bleeding lays the groundwork for a relationship wherein willing submission becomes rhetorically indistinguishable from enforced subjugation: a condition that never exists without the danger of rebellion.

Menstrual and marital blood marked important changes in women's cultural status and identity, and the blood of childbirth was equally fraught with signification. The potential for wifely insubordination caused a great deal of masculine unease in this period, and a woman's transition from a bleeding bride to a bleeding mother gave an additional valence to her mysterious propagative power. Beyond the deeply gendered nature of the event itself, the bleeding that followed childbirth meant that new fathers were forbidden sexual access to their wives during the post-partum period. In this way, the blood accompanying a woman's transformation from wife to mother interrupted and temporarily suspended a husband's patriarchal control over his wife's body. This period of relative autonomy was brief—generally lasting four to six weeks—but important, and the customary observance of this "gender month" ensured that the mother was excused from most of her regular obligations. In his compendious conduct book,

⁴³ Balizet 36-37.

Of Domesticall Duties, the clergyman and polemicist William Gouge cautioned that newly delivered women required rest to make a proper recovery: “The mother at that time by reason of her travail and delivery is weak, and not to have her head troubled with many cares.”⁴⁴ As Gouge notes, this hiatus was partially intended to allow the post-partum woman some peace and quiet, but it was also meant to insulate her from ordinary activities (and from most other people) while she was still “green,” a term used to indicate female sickness in general but “primarily related to the condition of ‘greensickness,’ amenorrhea, the stoppage of menses or terms.”⁴⁵

Cressy writes that, “sixteenth-century folklore held that...[a] ‘green woman’ should stay at home, refrain from sexual intercourse, and not participate in the sacraments of the church” between the time of her confinement and the ceremony of “churching.”⁴⁶ This “ritual performance...secured a ritual closure to the extended process of childbearing” and marked the end of the mother’s convalescence and her resumption of normal activities.⁴⁷ The practice of churching was a controversial topic in post-Reformation England, where it was presented variously as a service of thanksgiving, a public and fundamentally feminine celebration of the mother’s safe passage through the dangers of childbirth and delivery, or a retrograde, superstitious by-product of pagan, Jewish, or (arguably even worse) popish idolatry. With roots in Hellenic, Hebrew, and

⁴⁴ William Gouge, *Of domesticall duties eight treatises*, London: 1622. Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online.

<http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

⁴⁵ Cressy 203.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Cressy 197.

Catholic traditions, churching seemed designed to provoke Protestant anxieties, and Puritans inveighed against the custom as a Satanic tool “for the advancement and restoring againe of Poperie.”⁴⁸ In addition to its troubling religious antecedents and slippery cultural function, the practice “brought mothers and their birth attendants together within a holy space” where “the privileging of the maternal body’s experience...was an intrusion into and appropriation of a sacred male space.”⁴⁹ Bicks notes that “by opening the doors of the post-Reformation church to the midwife and the maternal bodies she attended,” the custom risked going beyond giving thanks for women’s safe deliverance to valorizing their lived, fleshly, messy corporeality, thereby threatening to “spot the body of the Protestant mother and the reformed church that celebrated it, sending both backsliding into the ruins of their idolatrous past.”⁵⁰

Belizet writes that “woman’s blood implied a range of negative associations ranging from bodily filth and sexual incontinence to popishness and idolatry,” and it is intriguing that unchurched new mothers were considered ‘green’ (i.e. not menstruating), since women recovering from childbirth bleed a great deal.⁵¹ But this lochia or “after-purging” was apparently not deemed part of the ordinary female cycle, and was instead symptomatic of the post-partum woman’s “weakness and uncleanness.” Despite this implied social opprobrium, the gender

⁴⁸ *Certaine Questions by Way of Conference Between a Chauncelor and a Kinswoman of his Concerning Churching of Women* (London: 1601). Tufts University Libraries. Early English Books Online.

<http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

⁴⁹ Bicks 168, 169.

⁵⁰ Bicks 168.

⁵¹ Belizet 69.

month must have been a welcome respite, and it is pleasing to think of the ways early modern mothers contrived to turn their post-natal sequestration into a quasi-holiday, and their reintroduction to the community into a celebration of female bodies in the face of institutional suspicion. Excused from household and marital duties, a woman who weathered and emerged safely from the trial of childbirth could deploy her perceived weakness to advantage: resting, eating, drinking, and visiting with female relatives and gossips. In this way, misogynist ideas about post-partum bodies and their “unclean” leakages reprieved new mothers from wifely obligations, while the “empowered female society on public display” in the churching ritual carved out a space where their procreative bodies were honored, even as their parturient pain and blood heralded the new servitude of motherhood.⁵²

VI.

Institutionalized bleeding was a commonplace in many areas of early modern life: sexual consummation, childbirth, bloodletting for illness, hunting for food and sport, duels of honor, and warfare all entailed the spilling of blood, and there was substantial conceptual overlap between these activities. In her Introduction to Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part I*, Jean Howard remarks on Talbot’s characterization of his son John’s first battle as a rite of marital as well as martial passage: “The ireful bastard Orléans, that drew blood / From thee, my boy, and had the maidenhood / of thy first fight” (4.6.16-18). The elder Talbot urges the boy to leave the field, but the “fledgling warrior” insists on remaining by his father’s

⁵² Bicks 171.

side, “certain that flight would prove him both effeminate and baseborn”:

Instead, he is initiated into the rites of manhood by shedding blood and sustaining wounds in what can only be described as an erotics of battle... Young Talbot shedding blood in his first battle, is compared to a young girl who bleeds during her first experience of intercourse. The cut and thrust of battle is thus portrayed as a sexual encounter in which the goal is to penetrate the body and shed the blood of one’s enemy.⁵³

This parallel between the loss of virginity and an adolescent’s first taste of warfare is striking, since the lost maidenhead belongs to the person acting to spill blood, rather than the one who is acted upon, and from whose body that blood flows. In an equally arresting gender reversal, eschewing the fight that takes his “maidenhood” would render the young man “effeminate.” In order to fight like a man, the would-be warrior must figuratively bleed like a girl by making another man bleed in earnest.

If soldiers were akin to brides, housewives were warriors on the home front, where they wielded a variety of weapons, and the ordinary business of running a household entailed its share of gory tasks. The early modern wife and mother was no stranger to life’s messy physicality beyond the lying-in chamber and nursery, and her daily work in the kitchen involved continual exposure to flesh and blood, whether living or dead. There is a compelling incongruity in picturing the “nurturing” housewife as a butcher, performing—on a small, private scale—actions that were deemed necessary but socially marginalized in the wider community. Raphael Hythloday, Thomas More’s narrator in *Utopia*, makes a point of mentioning that livestock in that idealized society are killed by slaves in

⁵³Jean E. Howard, Introduction, “The First Part of Henry VI,” *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2016), 420.

places “without their towns...for the Utopians suffer none of their citizens to kill their cattle, because they think that pity and good-nature, which are among the best of those affections that are born with us, are much impaired by the butchering of animals.”⁵⁴ Hythloday explains that hunting on behalf of the community is also relegated to butchers, since the Utopian citizens “look on the desire for bloodshed, even of beasts, as a mark of a mind that is already corrupted with cruelty, or that at least by the frequent returns of so brutal a pleasure must degenerate into it.”⁵⁵

Karl Steel has written of how butchers “have been generally...feared as murderers and agents of social disruption,” and the ways “butchery...threatens to confuse human and animal bodies.”⁵⁶ Moreover, in his comments on the longstanding association between butchers and soldiers (another career requiring trained and socially licensed killers), Steel notes: “if the professional boundaries between butcher and soldier are either negligible...or readily overcome...the butcher as soldier or murderer may not so much transgress boundaries as demonstrate...the coterminousness of the supposedly separate categories of animal and human flesh and lives.”⁵⁷ Taken alongside its physical brutality and culturally mandated dissociation from “pity and good-nature,” the semiotic masculinity of butchering adds another layer of potential disorder to the figure of the animal-dismembering housewife, raising the troubling possibility that women’s useful, homely facility at turning quick bodies into dead ones might

⁵⁴ Thomas More, *Utopia* (Dover Publications, 1997), 38-39.

⁵⁵ More 51.

⁵⁶ Karl Steel, *How To Make A Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 207.

⁵⁷ Steel 210.

extend to the nursery. The act of changing animals into carcasses, and thence into sustaining, wholesome food is a profoundly transformative one, comprising making and unmaking: livestock are bred, sheltered, reared, and cared for until they are ready for slaughter, at which point the unmade animal becomes the finished meal. Contemporary domestic treatises stress the figurative concept of an embodied home wherein the husband functions as the head, and the well-ordered household is a healthy body. Should the woman of the house—ancillary to the head but superior to lesser members—employ certain of her conventional domestic skills beyond the kitchen, she materially and notionally dismembers the family, the community to which it belongs, and the patriarchal framework underpinning analogical thought.

VII.

Frances E. Dolan observes that “infanticide statutes articulated fears about women’s capacity for violence rather than accurately describing their behavior,” but although the rarity of such crimes exposes these concerns as largely unjustified, they have deep cultural roots.⁵⁸ Anxieties about doting mothers becoming infanticidal monsters reach back to Medea, to whom early modern child-killers are often compared in ballads and broadsheets. Taken in this context, it is significant that Margaret Vincent’s delusion first manifests as wilful obstinacy: the formerly “discreet” and “modest” woman seeks to dictate her family’s religion, and when denied that power, she seizes it by killing them. Comparing her to “a pitiless Medea,” *A Pittiless Mother* describes Vincent’s

⁵⁸ Dolan 131.

bloodlust as insatiable and all-consuming once aroused:

These two pretty children being thus murdered, without all hope of recovery, she began to grow desperate and still to desire more and more blood, which had been a third murder of her own babes, had it not been abroad at nurse and by that means could not be accomplished. Whereupon she fell into a violent rage, purposing as then to shew the like mischief upon herself.⁵⁹

By invoking Medea, the pamphlet explicitly casts Vincent's crime as one not only of misguided spiritual error but vengeful disobedience: "she *made* her husband fatherless of two as pretty children as ever came from woman's womb," adding the destruction of his heirs and patrilineal "house" to her litany of misdeeds.⁶⁰ Indeed, Martin asserts that "Vincent's crime would be classified...today as a revenge killing, in which a parent uses violence against natal children to inflict harm on a partner," and notes that *A Pittlesse Mother* mentions that the maidservant's absence was due to a local dispute about

the use of a commons claimed jointly by the towns of Acton, where the Vincents lived, and the village of Willesdon. On the day of the murders, Acton's women had been delegated to defend the commons from Willesdon cattle. Margaret excused herself from participating and sent her maidservant on her behalf. The writer parallels her refusal to defend community property rights with the domestic violation of her husband's 'property' [i.e. his children] in her desire for revenge.⁶¹

While I feel Martin's argument goes too far in decentralizing Margaret (and privileging her husband's interests), he raises an interesting point about contemporary views of female intransigence. In another literary echo of a murderous woman addressing a man bereft of heirs, Vincent's insistence that

⁵⁹ *A Pittlesse Mother* image 4.

⁶⁰ *A Pittlesse Mother* image 6 (my emphasis).

⁶¹ Martin 164, 165.

“what’s done is past...and I nothing at all repent it” illustrates her “bewitching willfulness” and evokes Lady Macbeth’s “Things without all remedy/ Should be without regard; what’s done, is done” (*Macbeth*, 3.2.12-13).⁶² Although her infanticide may be only metaphorical, the rhetoric of Shakespeare’s “fiend-like queen”—shifting abruptly from the wistful nostalgia of “how tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me” to dashing its brains out “while it was smiling in my face”—suggests the terrifying coexistence of nurturing and murderous impulses within the maternal body. *A Pittiless Mother*’s author expounds at some length on Vincent’s brutal subversion of her motherly feelings and functions:

Oh, that the blood of her own body should have no more power to pierce remorse into her iron-natured heart, when pagan women that know not God nor have any feeling of his deity will shun to commit bloodshed, much more of their own seed. The cannibals that eat one another will spare the fruits of their own bodies; the savages will do the like; yea, every beast and fowl hath a feeling of nature, and according to kind will cherish their young ones. And shall woman, nay, a Christian woman, God’s own image, be more unnatural than pagan, cannibal, savage, beast, or fowl? ⁶³

Mothers are often compared to their non-human counterparts in early modern texts, with those who murder their children invariably linked to the monstrous, the uncivilized, the “savage,” and the “unnatural.” Whereas Elizabeth Crashaw was a “phoenix” for giving up her life in childbirth, Margaret Vincent’s aberrant violation of maternal love and duty makes her “tygerous” and “wolfish.” The same animal imagery is used against Shakespeare’s merciless Margaret of Anjou—“She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France, / Whose tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth”; “O tiger's heart wrapt in a woman's hide!//

⁶² Martin 165.

⁶³ *A Pittiless Mother* image 5.

How couldst thou drain the life-blood of the child/ To bid the father wipe his eyes
withal/ And yet be seen to bear a woman's face?"—and although the pamphlet's
deployment of these epithets may be coincidental, it attests to the axiomatic
opposition between "inhuman" mothers and their properly domesticated
counterparts (*Henry VI Part III*, 1.4.111-12; 137-40). *A Pittilesse Mother*
underscores this point by contrasting Vincent with one of the animal kingdom's
most admirable mothers:

This Mistress Vincent, now deserving no name of gentlewoman, being in
her own house fast locked up only with her two small children, the one of
the age of five years, the other hardly two years old, unhappily brought to
that age to be made away by their own mother, who by nature should have
cherished them with her own body, as the pelican that pecks her own
breast to feed her young ones with her blood. But she, more cruel than the
viper, the envenomed serpent, the snake, or any beast whatsoever, against
all kind, takes away those lives to whom she first gave life.⁶⁴

Unlike the selfless mother bird, Vincent does not "cherish" her young, but is
instead aligned with (and unfavorably compared to) proverbially vicious species
like vipers, serpents, and snakes. These "envenomed" animals are traditionally
connected to insincerity, guile, and falsehood, as in the juxtaposition of snake
imagery with Vincent's betrayal of her children's faith and trust:

This creature not deserving mother's name, as I said before, not yet glutted
nor sufficed with these few drops of innocent blood...She came unto the
elder child of that small age that it could hardly discern a mother's cruelty
nor understand the fatal destiny fallen upon the other before, which as it
were seemed to smile upon her as though it begged for pity, but all in vain,
for so tyrannous was her heart that without all motherly pity she made it
drink of the same bitter cup as she had done the other.⁶⁵

In place of the mother pelican's life-sustaining blood, Vincent offers her

⁶⁴ *A Pittilesse Mother* image 4.

⁶⁵ *A Pittilesse Mother* image 5.

“innocent,” uncomprehending child the “bitter cup” of murder at his own mother’s hands (and in another echo of Lady Macbeth, while it was smiling in her face). Being herself deceived by the Devil’s “cunning instruments,” the spiritual sustenance and eternal salvation she thinks to offer her children is actually poison: “a witchcraft begot by Hell and nursed by the Romish sect, from which enchantment God in Heaven defend us.”⁶⁶

The pamphlet’s comparison of Margaret Vincent to proverbially toxic animals is congruent with Reformation depictions of sin, falsehood, and heresy, especially with regard to Roman Catholicism. Edmund Spenser offers a captivating analogue to *A Pittilesse Mother*’s portrait of malformed maternity in the figure of Error, the hideously fecund and perpetually lactating serpent/monster in Book One of *The Faerie Queene*. When the well-meaning but feckless Redcrosse Knight enters the creature’s den, deep within the wandering wood, he encounters a nightmarish family scene:

...forth vnto the darksome hole he went,^{[L][SEP]}
 And looked in: his glistring armor made,^{[L][SEP]}
 A litle glooming light, much like a shade,^{[L][SEP]}
 By which he saw the vgly monster plaine,^{[L][SEP]}
 Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide,^{[L][SEP]}
 But th’other halfe did womans shape retaine,^{[L][SEP]}
 Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.

And as she lay vpon the durtie ground,^{[L][SEP]}
 Her huge long taile her den all ouerspred,^{[L][SEP]}
 Yet was in knots and many boughtes vpwound,^{[L][SEP]}
 Pointed with mortall sting. Of her there bred,^{[L][SEP]}
 A thousand yong ones, which she dayly fed,^{[L][SEP]}
 Sucking vpon her poisonous dug, each one,^{[L][SEP]}
 Of sundry shapes, yet all ill fauored,^{[L][SEP]}
 Soone as that vncouth light vpon them shone,^{[L][SEP]}

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone.
(*The Faerie Queene*, 1.1.14.3-9; 15.1-9)⁶⁷

Errorr “horribly” combines the properties of a poisonous serpent—“whom God and man does hate”—with those of a woman, and Spenser’s placement of the words “lothsom,” “filthie,” and “foule” directly after its “womans shape” invites speculation as to whether the speaker refers to the serpent as a whole or specifically to how the monster’s hybrid animality perverts her feminine characteristics. The description of the “durtie ground” on which she lay, and the disarray of her tail “in knots and many boughtes” adds a note of slatternly disorder to the scene, suggesting a correlation between the creature’s domestic chaos, her evil nature, and her unbridled fertility. Errorr is not only a disgusting, venomous monster who spews papist propaganda, but a terrible housekeeper.

Shannon Garner-Balandrin writes that the wandering knight’s “penetration of Errorr’s den has long been read as a clash between the male figure in ‘mayle’ and the personification of dangerous feminine sexuality and fecundity. Her womb-like mouth, her abiogenetic bile, and the porousness of her body provide a humeral horror of generative excess.”⁶⁸ This “generative excess” fills Redcrosse with loathing and dread; he is aghast at the creature’s unbridled fertility, and the variety of fluids and solids—both living and inanimate—that emerge from its “bestly body” (1.1.18.3). Garner-Balandrin focuses on Errorr’s status as an

⁶⁷ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 10. All ensuing quotations from the text cited parenthetically.

⁶⁸ Shannon Garner-Balandrin, "Into something rich and strange: early modern English romance and ecotheory" (PhD dissertation, Northeastern University, 2017), 49.

actively nursing mother, and examines contemporary “wisdom” viz. the effect of diet, environment, and humoral theory on lactating women, the composition of their breastmilk, and the shaping influence of nurses and their milk on developing infants. Her study includes Spenser’s own well-documented disapproval, in “A View of the Present State of Ireland,” of English couples who hired Irish wet-nurses, for fear that impressionable children might absorb the moral qualities, social values, religious beliefs, and other characteristics of the Irish along with their first food. There is insufficient space here to discuss this topic at length, but it is enough to say that as a model of careful early modern motherhood, *Error* scores poorly:

She is outwardly and inwardly spotted, described as one hated by God and man, she is sexualized, is in a constant state of parturition, and most especially, she is described in terms employed to invoke disgust... The only aspect of *Error*’s nursing that would have been lauded is that she does not put her children out to wet-nurse, and thus circumvents any outside influence on her children’s physical, moral, and social shape. However, as a humerally imbalanced and monstrous mother her children are already in trouble.⁶⁹

Spenser provides a maternal antithesis to *Error* in the form of Charissa, “a woman in her freshest age,^[L]_[SEP]/ Of wondrous beauty, and of bountie rare” who emerges from her “fruitfull nest” accompanied by “a multitude of babes.../ Whom she still fed, whiles they were weake & young” (1.30.1-2; 29.8; 31.1,3). This paragon of Protestant domestic virtue happily provides her infant children with nourishment—“Her necke and breasts were euer open bare,^[L]_[SEP]/ That ay thereof her babes might sucke their fill”— but unlike the slovenly *Error*, she is careful to wean and “thrust them forth still, as they wexed old” (1. 30.7-8; 31.3).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

The “Deformed monsters fowle, and blacke as inke” that pour forth from Errour’s “hellish sinke” continually ingest their mother’s unwholesome influence, while the “floud of poyson horrible and blacke” that spews “out of her filthy maw”^[1] as Errour vomits forth frogs, toads, books, papers, and “great lumpes of flesh and gobbets raw” is an obvious allegory for Catholic sophistry (1.1.22.7,5; 1.1.20.1-3, 7). Spenser’s graphic portrayal of papist superstition transmitted from mother to child as the monster’s “fruitfull cursed spawne of serpents small” feed from her “poysonous duggs” and upon her blood until “Their bellies swolne ... with fulnesse burst” aligns neatly with prevailing apprehensions about women as weak vessels, easily filled with false doctrine (1.1.22.6; 26.5). *A Pittillesse Mother* echoes these concerns as it relates how Margaret Vincent, her head filled with “Popish persuasions,” forces her children to drink from death’s “bitter cup” and becomes a “creature whose life’s overthrow may well serve for a clear looking-glass to see a woman’s weakness in, how soon and apt she is won unto wickedness, not only to the body’s overthrow but the soul’s danger.”⁷⁰

VIII.

Infanticide was historically associated with unruly female passion; Peter Hoffer and N.E. H. Hull note that in the early modern period “it was a crime for which women were indicted far more frequently than men...almost exactly the opposite of the distribution of the sexes in murders and manslaughters of adult victims,” going on to point out that “from 1612 to 1618, the Middlesex courts disposed of murder and manslaughter cases involving 63 (88 percent) men and

⁷⁰ *A Pittillesse Mother* image 2.

nine (12 percent) women.”⁷¹ This disparity is partially due to the fact that women were culturally less likely to engage in the type of adult-on-adult civilian violence—street combat, private duels, or crimes motivated by sexual jealousy—in which men were killed. Childcare, however, was almost exclusively women’s work, meaning that when women became angry or frustrated, the closest target for their anger might well be a child, and often their own child. But this association is not to suggest that maternal infanticide was commonplace, or viewed as anything but a tragic aberration and a grievous sin, even though legal developments indicate that the crime loomed large in the contemporary imagination. While most murdered children died at their mothers’ hands, these cases remained rare, and the majority of victims were the offspring of unmarried women who hoped to escape the social opprobrium and financial consequences of having a bastard child.

Martin writes that in both legal and more popular, ephemeral records, “the majority of printed reports...concern unmarried maidservants who became pregnant and were alleged to have murdered their newborn children immediately or soon after birth.”⁷² So closely were child-killing and illegitimacy connected in the contemporary imagination that infanticide was first made a specific offense in the 1624 Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthing of Bastard Children, which penalized single women not only for the crime itself, but for its concealment, and (implicitly) for getting pregnant in the first place, making a murdered infant the evidence of its mother’s crime as well as the victim:

⁷¹ Peter C Hoffer and N.E.H. Hull, *Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England 1558-1803* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 98.

⁷² Martin 156.

If any woman shall endeavor privately, by drowning or secret burying, or in any other way, either by herself or the procurement of others, to conceal the death of any such issue of her body, male or female, which being born alive, should by the laws of this realm be a bastard, and that she endeavour privately either by drowning or secret burying thereof, or any other way, either by herself or the procuring of others, so to conceal the death thereof, as that it may not come to light, whether it be born alive or not, but be concealed, in every such case the mother so offending shall suffer death as in the case of murder except such mother can make proof by one witness at the least, that the child (whose death was by her intended to be concealed) was born dead.⁷³

An unmarried woman who became pregnant was not merely a walking embodiment of sin and incontinence but also a practical nuisance. Such women tended to be poor and were often employed in domestic service, from which they would likely be dismissed should their condition come to light, making them a financial burden on the community. A bastard child was a social, economic, and moral catastrophe that could easily drive a woman with few options to acts of desperation, and the child-killing unwed mother, rooted in the harsh economic realities of female employment, was a recurring cautionary subject of broadsheets and pamphlets, and would become a standard character in the fictional narratives that eventually replaced them. Without figures like *The Bloody Mother's* Jane Hattersley (1610)—who bore and killed several of her married employer's bastards, perjured herself to absolve him, and was hanged alone—the popular novels of ensuing centuries might not be peopled with female protagonists who suffer the shame and other unwelcome consequences of illicit sex. Moll Flanders, Hetty Sorrel, and Tess Durbeyfield owe a major debt to the desperate women

⁷³ R.W. Malcolmson, "Infanticide in the Eighteenth Century," *Crime in England 1550-1800*, ed. J.S. Cockburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 196-197.

whose stories fill earlier, more ephemeral accounts of females “ruined” by accidental pregnancies.

Unlike their unwed sisters, “honest” matrons who killed their children were more likely to be judged insane or as victims of diabolic influence. Vanessa McMahon points out that, when able or inclined, married women were also permitted “to speak in their defense, to present themselves as good mothers acting out of desperation, madness, or a desire to protect” their children, as in Margaret Vincent’s case, or that of the Anabaptist Mary Champion.⁷⁴ Champion was adamant that her infant son should not be baptized until he was an adult, and when she met resistance from her Presbyterian husband, John (whom the 1647 pamphlet *Bloody Newes from Dover* laconically describes as “much perplexed”), “she took a great knife and cut off the Child’s head.”⁷⁵ The tract’s title page features a shocking woodcut of the murderous mother brandishing the child’s severed head as its body lies bleeding on the floor, while the accompanying text relates how “when her husband came in, she called him into a little Parlour, where the poore Infant lay bleeding, uttering these words: Behold husband, thy sweet Babe without a head, now go and baptize it; if you will, you must christen the head without a body: for here they lye separated.”⁷⁶ Marisha Caswell notes that the English criminal justice system in this period drew distinctions

⁷⁴ Vanessa McMahon, *Murder in Shakespeare’s England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 126.

⁷⁵ *Bloody newes from Dover. Being a true relation of the great and bloody murder, committed by Mary Champion (an Anabaptist) who cut off her childs head, being 7. weekes old, and held it to her husband to baptize.* (London: 1647). Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online, image 3. <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

which centered on the relationship between victim and killer, as is evident in the two distinct offences of petty treason and infanticide. Both were forms of homicide with highly specific definitions, which meant that the treatment of the accused depended not just on whether or not they had killed a person but also on their marital status. Marriage excused a woman's actions when it came to infanticide, but exacerbated them when it came to petty treason. Moreover, the experiences of the women accused of these crimes were shaped and informed by expectations of behavior consistent with their marital status.⁷⁷

The tone of contemporary infanticide accounts toggles between censorious didacticism, voyeuristic prurience, and Christian pity, and if the woman in question was married (and suitably remorseful), most texts express some hope for her soul's salvation, even as her body is consigned to the gallows.⁷⁸ This tacit concern, even sympathy, for mothers who violently subvert their primary social and biological role sits incongruously alongside salacious details like Mary Champion's decapitated infant, or the elaborate picnic packed by Elizabeth Barnes "to intice [her] child unto its slaughter," producing a heady brew of horror, bathos, and melodrama with a reclamation chaser.⁷⁹ Witness how *A Pittillesse Mother's* characterization of Margaret Vincent as "undutiful" ascribes her uncharacteristic behavior to spiritual error: "Oh, blinded ignorance! Oh, inhumane devotion! Purposing by this to merit Heaven, she hath deserved (without true repentance) the reward of damnation."⁸⁰ Yet once removed from malign influences and counseled by "certain Godly preachers," Vincent comprehends and

⁷⁷ Marisha Caswell, "Mothers, Wives, and Killers: Marital Status and Homicide in London, 1674-1790," in *Female Transgression in Early Modern England: Literary and Historical Explorations*, ed. Richard Hillman and Pauline Ruberry-Blanc (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 107.

⁷⁸ Dolan 132.

⁷⁹ Dolan 162.

⁸⁰ *A Pittillesse Mother* image 4.

regrets the wickedness of her actions, and the pamphlet closes on a relatively charitable note: “Her offence was begot by a strange occasion but buried, I hope, with true repentance.”⁸¹

The sensational rhetoric and frequently lurid woodcut illustrations of these texts ensured their success as popular page-turners, but the possible redemption they extend for wives who have otherwise “deserved ... the reward of damnation” contrasts sharply with the treatment doled out to their unwed counterparts. After Margaret Vincent accepts the ‘celestial consolations’ of Protestant clerics, she is restored to her former faith’s promise of salvation:

And now to come to a conclusion, as well of the discourse as of her life, she deserved death, and both law and justice hath awarded her the same. For her examination and free confession needed no jury: her own tongue proved a sufficient evidence, and her conscience a witness that condemned her. Her judgment and execution she received with a patient mind, her soul no doubt hath got a true penitent desire to be in Heaven, and the blood of her two innocent children so willfully shed (according to all charitable judgements) is washed away by the mercies of God.

A married woman who confessed her sins and begged pardon from her God and her husband (with “her own tongue”) reassumed her proper, subordinate position in her own marriage; in the broader analogical scheme, her “true repentance” brought some hope of grace. And while *A Pittlesse Mother* ends by admonishing readers that Vincent’s story should be “a warning unto you all,” it also suggests the possibility of a heavenly reunion with her slain children. Unmarried child-killers received no such “charitable judgements”: following execution, their corpses were surrendered for dissection, a fate reserved for particularly wicked criminals, and one which carried weightier consequences than public shame and

⁸¹ *A Pittlesse Mother* image 6.

physical suffering. Since penetrating a corpse was thought to imperil the soul, this post-mortem dismemberment irrevocably denied such women any hope of salvation. Although guilty of the same crime, and condemned to the same ignominious earthly end, infanticidal women who were neither contained nor constrained by the bonds of marriage were denied privileges accorded their “honest” contemporaries both in this world and the one to come.⁸²

IX.

The murderous mother retains her unique power to disturb across historical periods. Witness the rhetorical frenzy that surrounds infanticidal women compared with their male counterparts in the modern press, where the condemnatory, gendered preoccupations of early modern pamphlets are echoed by sensationalist reporters who employ a similar queasy mix of mawkish sentimentality, righteous indignation, and slaving bloodlust. Parents who kill are always bad, but mothers who do so inhabit a distinct category of moral, spiritual or psychological weakness, even if they act for what they imagine to be good reasons. If we compare early modern responses to murderous mothers claiming madness or diabolic influence with current attitudes towards post-partum depression and psychosis, Margaret Vincent has a close analogue in Andrea Yates, the evangelical Texas Christian sentenced to death for drowning her five children in 2001, in order to spare them from a sinful life in a fallen world. After her arrest, Yates described her children’s murder as “a mother's final act of

⁸² See the 1651 pamphlet *Newes from the Dead, or a True and Exact Narration of the Miraculous Deliverance of Anne Greene* for an instance of unmarried woman convicted of infanticide who survived her attempted execution and was granted a free pardon.

mercy” and said she believed that “if she killed her children, the state would execute her, Satan would be eliminated from the world, and the children would be saved.”⁸³ The more recent 2016 case of Bella “Baby Doe” Bond, the toddler murdered by her mother’s drug-addicted boyfriend because he believed the child was “a demon,” provides another example of how the public views these crimes. Although the mother was charged as an accessory after the fact, the degree of vilification she received far outweighed that directed at the actual killer, by virtue of her relationship to the victim.

The parallels between the Yates and Vincent cases are especially compelling: although separated by an ocean, nearly four centuries, and vastly different social and cultural contexts, the consequences of yesterday’s demonic influence (infanticide followed by hanging) and today’s post-partum psychosis (infanticide followed by a sentence of lethal injection) bear striking similarities.⁸⁴ In her lengthy study of the Yates case, Deborah Denno describes Andrea Yates’s life as “distinguished by religious obsession and a steadfast devotion to tales of sin and Scripture, a ‘repent-or-burn zeal’ that led her to believe she was a bad mother with ruined offspring ...she killed her children to save them from Satan,” and later insisted “that there was nothing wrong with her mind and that she deserved to die.”⁸⁵ Yates and her husband, Rusty, belonged to the “Quiverful” movement, an evangelical Protestant subset that fosters a view of matrimony in which a

⁸³ Deborah Denno, “Who is Andrea Yates? A Short Story About Insanity” (*Duke Journal of Gender and Law Policy* 10.1, 2003), 2.

⁸⁴ Under appeal, Yates’ sentence was later commuted to lifetime confinement in a psychiatric facility.

⁸⁵ Denno 3.

woman's biblically mandated role is that of wife, mother, and homemaker, in utter subjection to her husband. The ethos of early modern conduct books echoes loudly in this ideology, which proposes a nuptial arrangement strikingly similar to that prescribed by William Whately in 1617, encouraging wives to "print in their remembrance" that "GOD hath commanded that ye should acknowledge the authority of the husband and refer to him the honor of obedience."⁸⁶ The parallels between Yates's confession and early modern accounts of murderous mothers who became reconciled to their sin and its inevitable penalty are equally arresting. Maternal inadequacy, fear, anger, and/or guilt that lead to violence remain a source of cultural anxiety that spans historical periods, and mothers who find themselves unwilling or unable to perform their "natural" duties continue to express such feelings, whether they are interpreted as symptoms of illness or evidence of "true repentance."

Patriarchal authority is an abstract albeit powerful concept, but challenges to that authority can take frighteningly physical form. Infanticide exposes occluded aspects of mothering by demonstrating how women might not only desire, but act to bring about their children's deaths. Perhaps—as early modern readers may have supposed—these troubling urges indicate a defect in the maternal organism, a symptom of women's fundamentally mutable, unstable nature. Or they may be the necessary inverse of the exhausting commitment, the passionate emotions, and

⁸⁶William Whately, *A bride-bush, or A vvedding sermon compendiously describing the duties of married persons: by performing whereof, marriage shall be to them a great helpe, which now finde it a little hell*, London: 1617. In *Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance: An Annotated Edition of Contemporary Documents*, ed. Lloyd Davis (New York: Routledge, 1998), 28.

the surrender of personal desire and physical autonomy women have traditionally been told that mothering requires. The (presumably male) authors who chronicle these crimes in the early modern period seek to contain and neutralize disruptive female agency run wild, reifying order via the “unnatural” woman’s contrition and punishment while providing a warning to others. But, in the end, such efforts fail to exorcise the specter they raise. Whether a by-product, a waste product, or a fatal flaw in the ideology of motherhood itself, maternal infanticide lies outside the realm of masculine control, a perversion of the feminine art and craft of childrearing with the potential to undermine, dismember, and destroy the very systems mothers are charged with perpetuating.

Chapter Three
“Down goes the house of us, down, down, it sinks”:
Anxious Masculinity and the Petty Tyrant

The figure of the treacherous, violent wife or mother provoked anxiety in early modern England, but—as in all historical periods—women were far more likely to be the victims of domestic violence than its perpetrators. The analogical scheme that granted a husband and father conceptual dominion over his household might easily be exploited or perverted, and accounts of men who abuse their power and become tyrants occur in ballads, pamphlet literature, and theatrical texts, especially in the Jacobean and Caroline eras. Far from being benevolent sovereigns to whom wives, children, and servants should owe loving allegiance, such petty dictators misuse their “natural” rights and position, and risk destroying their little kingdoms in the process. The men in these stories may be driven by jealousy, sexual insecurity, emotional weakness, reversals of material fortune, madness, diabolic influence, or a combination of factors, and (like infanticidal mothers) sometimes kill their dependents for what they imagine to be their own good. This chapter examines popular literary representations of disastrously flawed patriarchs, including several generically diverse treatments of a notorious case of petty tyranny, and considers the degree to which these narratives express contemporary uneasiness about masculine authority, its potential to go awry, and the uncomfortable tension between the sovereign body politic and the fragile, imperfect body natural in which its power resides. In doing so, it argues that the project of these texts is both conservative and recuperative. They offer a critique of the frequently flawed application of patriarchal rule in the

real world, but at the same time they valorize the fundamental “rightness” of the analogical model itself.

One of the best-known contemporary theatrical examples of domestic rule gone wrong concerns an instance of paternal infanticide in Calverley, North Yorkshire on April 23, 1605, when a local squire killed his two sons, aged four years and eighteen months. The unnamed protagonist of the 1608 domestic drama, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (now widely attributed to Thomas Middleton) squanders his fortune and ancestral property in a “riot” of loose living, destroying his own prospects and those of his wife, children, and the brother for whose education he is responsible. This character, known only as the Husband, is so tormented by the prospect of his family’s imminent downfall that he deems their extinction preferable to a life of social and economic disgrace. Before stabbing his eldest son and heir, he expresses shame at the family’s debased circumstances and anxiety about the future: “My eldest beggar, thou shalt not live to ask an usurer bread, to cry at a great man’s gate, or follow ‘Good your honour’ by a coach; no, nor your brother. ‘Tis charity to brain you!” (*A Yorkshire Tragedy*, 4.100-103).¹ As Viviana Comensoli writes, “the family was an entrenched and frequently employed category in political philosophy...a king’s responsibilities to his subjects were similar to those of the father in his role as head of the household.”²

A Yorkshire Tragedy’s Husband is an unworthy ruler, who exercises his sovereign

¹ “A Yorkshire Tragedy,” in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

² Viviana Comensoli, “Homophobia and the Regulation of Desire: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Marlowe’s ‘Edward II.’” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4.2 Special Issue, Part 1: Lesbian and Gay Histories (Oct., 1993): 182.

power to spare the subordinate members of his little commonwealth the wages of his own incompetence. Faced with the loss of his ancient patrimony, the Husband is wracked by self-pity, guilt, and rage, which burst forth in a characteristically disjointed soliloquy that reflects his inner turmoil:

How well was I left, very well, very well! My lands showed like a full moon about me, but now the moon's i' th' last quarter, waning, waning. And I am mad to think that moon was mine: mine and my father's, and my forefathers', generations, generations. Down goes the house of us, down, down, it sinks. Now is the name a beggar, begs in me that name which hundreds of years has made this shire famous: in me, my posterity runs out. In my seed five are made miserable besides myself. My riot is now my brother's jailer, my wife's sighing, my three boys' penury, and mine own confusion. (4.70-81)

The Husband's real-life inspiration, Walter Calverley, became infamous for murdering his two eldest children, William and Walter, at their manor house not far from Leeds. Like Margaret Vincent's surviving infant, the couple's youngest child, Henry, was away at nurse and escaped his brothers' fate, although Calverley was en route to dispatch the "sucking beggar" when he was thrown from his horse and caught by the hue and cry (9.21). While *A Yorkshire Tragedy* presents its protagonist's mismanagement and loss of his family name and estate as the catalyst for a crime of passion, the historical Calverley claimed another motivation the day after the crime, during his examination. When asked if he had murdered his children, Calverley answered in the affirmative and declared

...that he hath had an intention to kill them for the whole space of two years past, and the reasons that moved him thereunto was, for that his said wife had many times theretofore uttered speeches and given signes and tokens unto him, whereby he mighte easily perceiue and conjecture, that the said children were not by him begotten, and that he hath found himself

to be in danger sundry times by his wife.³

The same document recounts how Calverley described wounding his wife after a servant named Carver refused to fetch the couple's youngest son from the wet nurse's house, and "being further examined, what he would have don to said childe if Carver had brought him, to that he said he wold have killed him also."⁴ Whether Calverley believed his accusations against his wife or was in his right mind when he made them (which seems in doubt), he apparently suffered some pangs of conscience in the wake of the crime, and made an eleventh-hour attempt to save what remained of the family fortune. Although he had confessed to killing his older sons and stabbing his wife, he later refused to enter a plea of guilty or not guilty, which ensured his property was "not liable to forfeiture, which would normally have been part of the penalty for a conviction of murder."⁵ Refusal to plead carried a sentence of *peine forte et dure* ("strong and hard punishment"), however, and Walter Calverley was pressed to death on August 5, 1605 at the age of twenty-six. Although it is unclear whether he was driven by contrition, by a desire to save his widow and/or infant heir from penury, or by an atavistic urge to preserve the ancestral estate, his decision to stay silent partially restored the unstable, irresponsible husband and father to his role as provider and protector, even as his physical body and public reputation perished for mishandling that

³ "Walter Calverley, of Calverley, Esq., his examination for the murdering of his children," in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* ed. A.C. Cawley and Barry Gaines (Manchester; Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1986), 111.

⁴ Calverley examination, 111.

⁵ Introduction, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, ed. A.C. Cawley and Barry Gaines (Manchester; Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1986), 11.

position.

In order to address the problem of petty tyranny without advocating domestic—or indeed any—rebellion, texts like *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers*, the contemporary prose account on which the play is closely based, had to restore the patriarchal *status quo* without sanctioning the reprehensible actions of its local representatives. The play and the pamphlet accomplish this restoration by attributing a respectable man’s downfall to diabolic interference and divine justice, thereby contextualizing and containing his abuse of God-given authority. George Wilkins’ 1607 play, *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, is also loosely based on the Calverley case, but discards the domestic tragedy of infanticide in favor of a quasi-comedic tale of thwarted love, in which misplaced patriarchal authority is abused by the main character’s guardian: a motif that critiques a specific but less calamitous misapplication of an established system without questioning its inherent validity. In contrast to condemnatory portrayals of husband-killers and infanticidal mothers who disrupt domestic order, petty tyranny narratives typically emphasize the commendable patience of the women involved, “the pathos, dutiful submissiveness, and therefore moral purity of whose loyal victimhood is used to point up the depravity and cruelty of their male oppressors.”⁶ Although the real life Calverley’s crime was his children’s murder, the story is also one of appalling spousal abuse, and all three treatments of the case omit any suggestion of impropriety by the female victims, presenting them instead as sympathetic figures who strive to fulfill their

⁶ Peter Lake, *The Anti-Christ’s Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists, and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 80.

prescribed roles despite the protagonist's mistreatment and "peevisish prodigality."⁷

II.

The system of primogeniture anoints the eldest son sovereign of his ancestral "house," while making him responsible for the fortunes of current and future generations, and the Calverley case exemplifies the double-edged nature of an analogical scheme that framed the household as a miniature state. Given the instability of property (and of many young men), the intersection of patriarchal authority and a precarious masculine ego could prove a toxic mix. Indeed, as Mark Breitenberg contends:

The phrase "anxious masculinity" is redundant. Masculine subjectivity constructed and sustained by patriarchal culture—infused with patriarchal assumptions about power, privilege, sexual desire, the body—inevitably engenders various degrees of anxiety in its male members. In early modern England, despite a broad and powerful discourse that assumed a natural, divinely ordained basis for authority based on gender and status, signs of anxiety among those whose privilege might have seemed inviolable are widespread.⁸

Breitenberg views this pervasive masculine insecurity as "a cauldron of bubbling anxieties" that overflows in the petty tyrant's language and behavior. He is a man with the authority to control others, but who has difficulty controlling his own impulses and desires.⁹ As Frances E. Dolan observes, "the very few extant representations of murderous fathers focus on relatively privileged perpetrators,

⁷ Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 156.

⁸ Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

married gentlemen whose murder of their heirs is the final act of a prodigal life. The riotous living that precedes and motivates the murders is itself presented as violent and self-consuming.”¹⁰ As the firstborn son of the highest-ranking family in an ancient parish bearing their name, Walter Calverley encapsulates and embodies this figure.¹¹ Local historian Edward Garnett writes that the family arrived in Yorkshire around 1100 as Scottish immigrants, and eventually became lords of the manor through intermarriage with the local nobility. In his detailed study of the Calverley murders, Garnett records that “a William Le Scot is recorded in the Pipe Roll in 1165, and his charter granting Calverley Church to Archbishop Roger is dated 1179-80. The surname of Scot was retained until about 1400, after which the family was always known as the Calverleys of Calverley.”¹² The narrator of *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* makes a point of juxtaposing Walter Calverley’s distinguished pedigree with a crime “so detestable, that were it not it desires record for example sake, Humanitie could wish it rather utterly forgot,” stressing that its perpetrator was “bred a gentleman” and had once been considered quite a catch:

...[his] parents were such, as left him seven or eight hundred pound a yeare, to inrich his hopes, cherish his content, and make him fortunate. His Father dying before he had reacht the yeares of privilege, during his nonage, he was warde to a most noble and worthy gentleman in this land, in all which time his course of life did promise so much good, that there was commendable gravity appeared even in his youth, he being of this

¹⁰ Dolan 153.

¹¹ The place name predates the Domesday Book of 1086, which lists it as “Calverleia: clearing where calves are pastured. OE *calf* (genitive plural *calfra*) + *leah*.” *Dictionary of Place Names*, ed. David Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 94.

¹² Edward Garnett, *The Story of the Calverley Murders, 23rd April, 1605: Prelude, Deed, and Sequel* (Leeds: Margaret Fenton Ltd., 1991), 5.

hope, virtuous in his life, worthy by his birth, was sought unto by many gallant Gentlemen, and desired that he would unite his fortune into their families, by matching himself to one and the chiefe of their daughters.¹³

But for all the young man's "hopes," prestigious bloodline, and early promise, the Calverleys were also recusant Catholics, which jeopardized the family fortunes. During Elizabeth I's reign, Walter's parents and grandparents faced regular fines for failing to attend church and related nonconformities; both his father, William, and his uncle Edmund (an ordained priest who ended his life in exile) were jailed at various times.¹⁴ In June 1569, William Calverley's father wrote Matthew Parker, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to plead for his son's release from the Marshalsea prison, arguing that the young man's "backwardness in Religion proceedeth rather from some fantasticall humour and weaknes of witt and braine than anie other reason or perswacion" and that "he hathe bene of longe tyme subject to lunacie."¹⁵ These early allusions to "weaknes of witt and braine" and "lunacie" in the family hint at the moral and psychological instability later attributed to the murderous Walter, and while a link between Catholicism and madness is never made explicit in the prose or theatrical treatments of the Calverley murders (unlike Margaret Vincent's case, in which papist influence and diabolic possession are directly correlated), *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie*

¹³ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers: The one by Maister Cauerley, a Yorkeshire Gentleman, practised upon his wife, and committed vpon his two Children, the three and twentie of Aprill 1605. The other, by Mistris Browne, and her seruant Peter, vpon her husband, who were executed in Lent last past at Bury in Suffolke* (London: 1605), in *A Yorkeshire Tragedy* ed. A.C. Cawley and Barry Gaines (Manchester; Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1986), 96.

¹⁴ Garnett 11.

¹⁵ Cawley and Gaines 39.

Murthers and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* both highlight spiritual malaise and supernatural interference as factors in the crime.

When William Calverley died in 1596, his eldest son was only seventeen, and in order to protect Walter's inheritance from confiscation, his guardianship was granted to the Protestant Lady Anne Gargrave and her son Richard (the pamphlet's "noble and worthy gentleman").¹⁶ Wardship gave the guardian control of an underage heir's lands, property, and any associated profits, along with the authority to allow or forbid the ward's marriage during his minority; this was an influential and potentially lucrative position, and the system was notoriously prone to abuse. Lady Gargrave was a widow with nine children, and contemporary sources suggest she sought young Calverley's guardianship in order to broker a match between him and one of her six daughters, for which she was prepared to offer a sizable dowry.¹⁷ But before the arrangements were finalized, another ambitious mother swooped in to claim this dubious prize for her own daughter. Anne, Lady Cobham, was the widow of Sir Henry Brooke, a distant relation to Robert Cecil, Marquis of Salisbury, and it was through these powerful family connections that Lady Cobham arranged Calverley's marriage to her eldest daughter, Philippa.¹⁸ In a letter to Cecil dated May 3, 1599, Lady Cobham wrote,

¹⁶ Cawley and Gaines. 7.

¹⁷ Garnett 20. Garnett also notes that there were local rumors that Walter had been formally contracted or even married to Lady Gargrave's daughter, making him a bigamist, but that such traditions probably arose after the murders and "seized upon by gossip writers and dramatists later, as yet more evidence of his shameful character."

¹⁸ It is also likely that these influential family ties were a factor in the playwright's choice not to include any actual names in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and instead identify the characters by roles: Husband, Wife, Son, Gentleman, etc.

“Good Sir. May it please you to understand that there is a marriage intended between my daughter Philippe and Mister Coverley of Coverley,” beseeching him to “finde it fitte it may be brought to passe” despite the young man’s minority and prior entanglement: “I understande...that he is in wardshippe till Aprill next to the Ladie Gargrave of yorke Shiere who hath tendered unto him her daughter and is wylinge to give xv C11 [£1500] in mariage with her. But it hath pleased God that he hath taken some likinge of my daughter that he is content to take her with a lesser portion.”¹⁹

Cecil presumably approved the match, since the couple were married soon after; the groom received a dowry of £1000, a substantially “lesser portion” that suggests the marriage was consensual and (at least partly) based in affection. But while Walter’s Catholic antecedents had little effect on his desirability as a prospective husband, his character proved another matter; before long, Lady Cobham was expressing concern about the “unstayed younge man” and appealing again to Cecil on her daughter’s behalf.²⁰ In June of 1600, she wrote in apparent distress that Walter—underage at the time of his marriage and thus unable to make Philippa a jointure—was imprisoned in the Fleete, where he had “fallen in to an extreame borninge ague and in truth his life... much doubted...therefor I humbly beseech your honor in the respect of...my Daughters necessitie yf he should die that you would stand our honourable good friend so much as to

¹⁹ “Calendar of the Most Honourable The Marquess of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire,” Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (London: 1883). <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000272332>

²⁰ Cawley and Gaines 9.

bestowe the wardshipp of his brother upon my Daughter.”²¹ Walter survived his illness, but while the details of his arrest and subsequent release are unknown, local records show him steadily losing property. By 1602 Philippa’s uncle, Sir John Brooke, had been made trustee of the Calverley estate, which was “vested in trust...for and during the lives of Walter Calverley, Esq., and Philippa his wife, and after their decease to the use and behoof of William Calverley, son and heir apparent, and his heirs male.”²² From this document we know that Walter had produced a son by 1602 but also placed the estate to which the child was heir in jeopardy and effectively abdicated (or been deposed from) his role as domestic sovereign before his twenty-third birthday.

The precise cause of Walter’s decline remains in question, but *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers*, published in June, 1605 (less than two months after the murders) frames Calverley’s downfall as “the tale of a rake’s progress into infanticide,” and presents the tragedy as divine punishment for failing in his spiritual duty to God, his temporal duty to the household he should rule and the patrimony he was bound to preserve, and for breaking faith with Lady Gargrave’s daughter (here unnamed), to whom he was first promised.²³ The pamphlet’s author(s) were clearly in a rush to get the story out; Calverley had as yet answered no formal charges, and would not be pressed to death until August, so neither they nor their early readers could know the case’s outcome. In tones merging the political with the bathetic, the narrator relates how

²¹ “Calendar of the Most Honourable The Marquess of Salisbury.”

²² Cawley and Gaines 10.

²³ Cawley and Gaines 12.

This Gentlewoman, Maister Caverleys wife, (if vows make a wife) tooke with an inward consideration, so to heart this unjust wrong, that exercising her howres onely in continual sorrow, shee brought herself to a consumption; who so plaide the insulting tyrant over her unblemished beautie, that the civill contention dwelt in her face of white and redde, was turned to a death-like palenesse, and all her arteres wherein the spirite of life mixed with blood doth runne, like giddie subjects in the Empire of her boddie, took such ungentle parte with this forraigne usurper, that where health before was her peacable soveraigne, now distracted sicknes and feeble weaknes were her untimely Conquerors.²⁴

The pamphlet also notes that despite Calverley's unjust behavior, the wronged woman eschews reproach or recrimination, and exhibits admirable feminine meekness, even going so far as to "intreate of God to grant both prosperous health and fruitful wealth to him and his, though I am sicke for his sake."²⁵ Given the preponderance of material about insubordinate and violent women in this period, this emphasis on the passive, compliant nature of the female victims is noteworthy; not one of them threatens any disruption of patriarchal order. As Cawley and Gaines remark, it is also significant that

The reason given by Calverley for killing his children—because they were 'were not by him begotten'—is not mentioned in the account of his examination in the pamphlet or the play, nor does either of these echo his accusation 'that he hath found himself to be in danger sundry times by his wife.' But in both play and pamphlet his groundless suspicion of his wife is emphasized.²⁶

Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers' exposure of Walter Calverley's capacity to infect and destroy a previously healthy, embodied "Empire" anticipates its central assertion that although his first betrothed, "conquered by the gentleness of her nature, forgave his fault; yet revenge being always in Gods

²⁴ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* 97-98.

²⁵ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* 98.

²⁶ Cawley and Gaines 111.

hand, thus it fel” that greater tragedy lay ahead, with a larger plan in place to visit the wages of Calverley’s sins and personal failings upon his innocent family.²⁷

III.

While both the prose account and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* elide the family’s Catholicism and lend no credence to the historical Calverley’s allegations against his wife, the latter also largely ignores his vexed romantic past, limiting it to a brief exchange in the opening scene between gossiping servants, one of whom quips that the Husband’s jilted fiancée “was blessed in her cradle, that he never came in her bed” (1.47).²⁸ Instead, the play focuses on its wastrel protagonist’s fondness for drinking, gambling, brawling, and worse, and foregrounds his mercurial moods as a cause for concern, suggesting that his unstable behavior is the product of internal disorder. Indeed, the Husband appears to suffer from melancholia, which was thought to arise from an imbalance of the four humors (in this case an excess of black bile), and was frequently linked to cholera (a surplus of yellow bile, believed to cause aggression). This was a common diagnosis in the early modern period; in his wildly popular treatise, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, the polemicist and clergyman Robert Burton asserts that anger is “a perturbation which carries the spirits outwards, and prepares the body to melancholy and madness itself.”²⁹ He also writes that the Greek philosopher and physician Galen

²⁷ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* 98.

²⁸ As Cawley and Gaines note, many scholars believe this scene to have been written by another playwright.

²⁹ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford: 1621), 3.1.230. Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online.

<http://eebo.chadwyck.com.exproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

...thinks that the spirits being darkned, and the substance of the Braine cloudy and darke, all objects thereof appear terrible, and the minde itself, by those darke, obscure, gross fumes, ascending from blacke humours, is in continual darkness, feare, & sorrow, divers terrible monstrous fictions in a thousand shapes & apparitions occurred, with violent passions, by which the braine and Phantasie are troubled and eclipsed... as children affrighted in the darke, so are melancholy men at all times, as having the inward cause with them & still carrying it about. Which black vapors...keep the minde in a perpetuall dungeon, and oppresse it with continuall feares, anxieties, sorrowes, &c.³⁰

The emotionally volatile Husband's "braine and phantasie" are certainly troubled: although he indulges in an array of vices, he seems to take no pleasure in these "riots," fixating instead on his financial woes, his unwanted responsibilities, and his festering resentment towards his wife and children. Consumed with sexual jealousy—"that singularly most dreadful exhibition of anxious masculinity"—he obsessively declares that his three sons are bastards and his wife "a harlot, / Whom though for fashion sake I married, / I never could abide" (2.73-75).³¹ When the Wife attempts to help him pay his mounting debts by appealing to her family, he spurns her with his foot, and furiously rejects her powerful uncle's offer of an appointment at court:

Out on thee, filth! Over and overjoyed, when I'm in torments? (*Spurns her.*) Thou politic whore, subtler than nine devils, was this thy journey to nuncle, to set down the history of me, of my state and fortunes? Shall I that dedicated myself to pleasure be now confin'd in service to crouch and stand like an old man i' th' hams, my hat off, I that never could abide to uncover my head i' th' church, base slut? This fruit bears thy complaints! (3.48-55)

Crying "Money, money, money, and thou must supply me!" he demands the Wife sell off her dowry, jewels, and other personal property, and later in the same scene

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Breitenberg 175.

he pulls a knife on her while shouting “Money, whore, money, or I’ll—” but is interrupted by a servant who enters “hastily” (2.57; 69). Like his historical inspiration, the play’s protagonist also defaults on his dependent brother’s university fees (the same brother whose wardship Lady Cobham had asked Cecil to grant her daughter should the historical Walter Calverley die), for which the young man is imprisoned. The Husband also incurs censure from his community for berating his family in the street. When three passing gentlemen overhear Calverley deriding his wife and children as a “strumpet and bastards,” they are abused in turn for chiding him; after a fourth remonstrates with him (only to be accused of being the Wife’s adulterous lover) the Husband is beaten in a duel and humiliated (2.103). But despite the other man’s parting admonition that he remember the “virtuous house” from which he descends and “heap not wrongful shame” on “a wife / Kind and obedient,” the Husband becomes more enraged, blaming his spouse for his troubles in increasingly violent terms (170; 173-74).

Revenge, I say,
I'm mad to be revenged. My strumpet wife,
It is thy quarrel that rips thus my flesh,
And makes my breast spit blood. But thou shalt bleed!
Vanquished? Got down? Unable e'en to speak?
Surely 'tis want of money makes men weak.
Ay, 'twas that o'erthrew me; I'd ne'er been down else.
(2.180-186)

In addition to its emphasis on the Husband’s fleshly weakness, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* implies that something more insidious than the effects of loose living or an imbalance of humors is ailing him. The Wife laments that he suffers “both beggary of the soul / As of the body” and has become “so much unlike / Himself at first, as if some vexed spirit / Had got his form upon him” (2.36-39). The

suggestion that darker forces are at work becomes more explicit when, upon learning that her spouse has murdered their young sons, she wonders “What has beguiled him of all grace/ And stole away humanity from his breast?” while the Husband repents only “that one’s left unkilld, /My brat at nurse. O, I would full fain have weaned him!” (7.32-33; 9.20-21). In his subsection, “A Digression of Divels, and how they cause Melancholy,” Burton cautions that cholera and melancholia can be both the cause and the effect of diabolic interference:

The Divell can alter the minde, and produce this disease of himself. . . the immediat cause is cholera adust: and there vpon belike this humour of melancholy, is called *Balneum Diaboli*, the Diuels Bath: the Divell spying his opportunity of such humours, driues them many times to dispaire, fury, rage, &c. . . of all others Melancholy persons are most subiect to diabolicall temptations, and illusions, and most apt to entertaine them and the Divell best able to work vpon them.³²

The Husband’s behavior becomes increasingly outrageous and his language grows more profane until the final scene, when he declares that the devil “glides” from him and he becomes rational and penitent. And although *A Yorkshire Tragedy* discards the pamphlet’s proposal that the Calverley tragedy was divine retribution for Walter’s mistreatment of Lady Gargrave’s daughter, the themes of sin and salvation are present throughout the play. In the Wife’s first soliloquy, she mentions her husband’s “fearful melancholy,” and bemoans the way his “voluptuous meetings, midnight revels,” and “surfeits” have endangered his soul:

But that which kills me most,
The weakness of his state so much dejected,
Not as a man repentant, but half mad,
His fortunes cannot answer his expense:
He sits and sullenly locks up his Arms,

³² Burton 2.1.69.

Forgetting heaven looks downward, which makes him
Appear so dreadful that he frights my heart,
Walks heavily, as if his soul were earth:
Not penitent for those his sins are past,
But vext his money cannot make them last—
A fearful melancholy, ungodly sorrow.
(2.10-21)

Given its omission of the Calverleys' Catholicism, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* makes a provocative addition to the source material by inventing a religious vocation for the Husband's younger brother, who suffers the consequences of his guardian's reckless conduct. This detail appears to be poetic license on the playwright's part, since although *Two Most Unnatural and Bloodie Murthers* talks of "what judgement by God should fall upon [Calverley], for suffering his brother to spend the glory of his youth, which is the time young men of hope should seeke for preferment, in prison by his meanes," it makes no mention of any training for the church.³³ It is only in *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, when the Master of the unnamed College arrives to collect the overdue fees, that the brother is described as "a man who, profited in his divine employments, might have made ten thousand souls fit for heaven, now by your careless courses cast in prison, which you must answer for, and assure your spirit it will come home at length" (4.17-19). As Lisa Hopkins observes in her comments about Middleton's possible authorship, "in despite of the known Catholicism of the family" and the lack of any such theme in the sources, it is striking that "the author of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* conjures up for Walter Calverley's younger brother a promising potential career as a preacher," particularly since "everything that we know about Thomas Middleton suggests

³³ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* 105.

that he was a Puritan, and in many of his plays he seems to take positive delight in chronicling the misfortunes of Catholics or those identified with Catholic families...One would expect that the Catholic Calverleys would similarly be grist to his mill,” but instead the younger brother’s thwarted career as a (presumably Protestant) clergyman becomes another sin to be laid at the Husband’s door.³⁴

The play elides the family’s recusant faith, but it does emphasize preaching, as numerous characters confront and try to counsel the Husband about his irresponsible and godless behavior. Hopkins remarks that this is another intriguing choice, since although the (probable) playwright’s own religion “promoted unmediated commerce between man and his God...the Master here places a quasi-Catholic value on the importance of an intermediary, albeit an exhortatory cleric rather than an intercessory saint.”³⁵ Moreover, the visiting Master performs just such an intercessory role himself; the Husband declares he will “play as freely / As when my state was fullest” despite the pleas of his wife and neighbors, but he meets the Master’s sermon about the would-be cleric’s predicament with at least a show of compunction (2.82-83). “Sir, you have much wrought with me; I feel you in my soul. You are your art's master. I never had sense till now; your syllables have cleft me. Both for your words and pains I thank you. I cannot but acknowledge grievous wrongs done to my brother, mighty, mighty, mighty wrongs” (4.32-37).

It is left ambiguous whether the Husband is genuinely moved by the Master’s

³⁴ Lisa Hopkins, "A Yorkshire Tragedy and Middleton's Tragic Aesthetic." *Early Modern Literary Studies* 8.3 (January, 2003): 7.
<https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/08-3/hopkyork.html>

³⁵ Hopkins 7.

words and/or his brother's plight, mocking his uninvited guest with false repentance, or merely buying time, since immediately after this speech he dashes to an upper chamber (on the pretext of fetching money), where he kills his children, attacks his wife, and throws a maidservant downstairs before taking horse in his failed attempt to reach his infant son at the wet nurse.³⁶ Especially in light of his later penitence, it is striking that this episode is the only time the Husband responds to criticism with anything but contempt, although there is also the disturbing possibility that in being "wrought" by the Master's remonstrations, the Husband determines that he can only save his family from disaster by killing them. (The pamphlet's version of this episode claims that the Master's lecture to Calverley "did so harrowe up his soule with...invincible arguments, that in that minute he made him looke backe into the error of his life, which scarce ever in his life had hee done before this instant," which brings on "a deepe consideration of his state" and a fit of abject self-recrimination immediately before the murders.)³⁷

By the play's end, the Husband regains his senses and, unlike his historical prototype, expresses remorse before being taken away for execution. In contrast to his pre-murder encounter with the Master of the College, this final conversion does not occur as the result of admonishment, but in response to his wife's exemplary (if incongruous) forbearance. Like "the distressed Gentle woman" of

³⁶ The Husband's comment that "the surest way to charm a woman's tongue / Is break her neck; a politician did it" is almost certainly a reference to the mysterious death of Amy Robsart, the wife of Elizabeth I's favorite, Robert Dudley (5.13-14). Robsart was found dead of a broken neck at the foot of a staircase in 1560, leading to widespread speculation that her husband had arranged to have her killed so he might be free to marry the queen.

³⁷ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* 105.

the pamphlet, who “when shee saw him forgot bothe her own wounds, and the death of her two children, and did as lovingly kisse him and tenderly imbrace him as he had never done her wrong,” the Wife finds it in her heart to forgive her spouse, even with their “two bleeding boys / Laid forth upon the thresholds” (10.33-34).³⁸ In the couple’s last exchange, the Wife suggests that her husband’s cruel treatment has been even more hurtful than the loss of her children:

WIFE.

O my sweet husband, my dear distressed husband,
Now in the hands of unrelenting laws!
My greatest sorrow, my extremest bleeding;
Now my soul bleeds.

HUSBAND.

How now, kind to me?
Did I not wound thee, left thee for dead?

WIFE.

Tut, far greater wounds did my breast feel;
Unkindness strikes a deeper wound than steel.
You have been still unkind to me.

HUSBAND.

Faith, and so I think I have.
I did my murders roughly, out of hand,
Desperate and sudden. But thou hast devised
A fine way now to kill me. Thou hast given mine eyes
Seven wounds a piece; now glides the devil from me,
Departs at every joint, heaves up my nails.
O, catch him new torments, that were ne’er invented,
Bind him one thousand more, you blessed angels,
In that pit bottomless. Let him not rise
To make men act unnatural tragedies,
To spread into a father, and, in fury,
Make him his children’s executioners;
Murder his wife, his servants, and who not?
For that man’s dark, where heaven is quite forgot.

³⁸ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* 109-110.

WIFE.
O, my repentant husband!

HUSBAND.
My dear soul, whom I too much have wronged,
For death I die, and for this have I longed.

WIFE.
Thou shouldst not, be assured, for these faults die
If the law could forgive as soon as I.
(10.6-32)

The Husband's sudden penitence is a major tonal shift for a character who in the prior scene asserted, "I have consumed all, played away long acre, / And I thought it the charitablest deed I could do / To cozen beggary and knock my house o' the head," and regretted nothing but his youngest child's escape (9.16-18). As with much of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, this defiant explanatory speech hews closely to the text of *Two Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers*, which records that when captured Calverley "made this answere: I have done Sir that I rejoyce at, and repent this, that I had not killed the other; I had brought them to beggary, and am resolved I could not have pleased God better than by freeing them from it."³⁹ For the closing scene, the playwright expands significantly on the pamphlet's brief description of the couple's final meeting, the Wife's forgiveness, and the Husband's remorse, to end on a note of pathos tinged with potential redemption. Although she cannot save his mortal body, the Wife's declaration of love, combined with the remembrance of his own unkindness, leads the Husband to repent his sins and save his soul. In both the play and the pamphlet, this show of penitence has the effect of exorcising the diabolic influence that drove his earlier

³⁹ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* 109.

actions, and suggesting the possibility of heavenly as well as earthly forgiveness.

Two Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers describes this encounter as so affecting

that if it were possible, the authorities might have abjured due justice:

...imbracing one another there was so pitiful lamentation betweene them, that had flint had eares, it would have melted into water. And could either words or teares have perswaded his keepers to have left him in her armes, she, Mistres Caverley, (before the blood was washed off from her clothes, which he had pierced out of her and her infants bodyes) gave occasion, would have altered them.⁴⁰

Many critics have noted that the Griselda-like patience of both the pamphlet's Mistress Calverley and the play's Wife is difficult to accept or applaud (conjuring as it does the Stockholm Syndrome suffered by many abuse victims), but in the context of the play this reconciliation reinforces both the ideal of the subservient wife and the notion of the married couple as a single corporate unit. Seeing her husband taken into custody as a prisoner, the Wife declares, "More wretched am I now in this distress/ Than former sorrows made me," and when reminded that "one joy is yet unmurdered...a boy at nurse" she replies,

Dearer than all is my dear husband's life,
Heaven give my body strength, which yet is faint
With much expense of blood, and I will kneel,
Sue for his life, number up all my friends
To plead for pardon—my dear husband's life!
(10.62-69)

It is the Husband who mourns for his slain children in this scene—the sight of their corpses is "weight enough to make a heart-string crack"—while "the Wife's thoughts are engrossed by her husband, who seems to get the major share of her

⁴⁰ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers*, 110.

sorrow and her love” (10.35).⁴¹ Despite the presence of their still-bleeding bodies, she only mentions her slaughtered offspring once, and this total focus on her spouse confirms her in the role of archetypal helpmeet (note that the character is not named “the Mother”). The Wife’s primary allegiance is to her husband as head of their embodied household, and the children of their union remain lesser members, even in death.⁴² Moreover, her relative indifference to her children—and to her own wounds—is not portrayed as odd or troubling to the onlookers. To the contrary, she wins praise for her loyalty; upon hearing her pleas for clemency, the Master of the College (who raised the alarm after discovering the Husband’s crime) marvels, “Was it in man to wound so kind a woman? / I’ll ever praise a woman for thy sake” (10.70-71).

Cawley and Gaines write that the audience must either accept the Wife’s conduct as “a miracle of forgiveness or suppose that she concentrates her emotions on her husband in order to suppress an unbearable sorrow for her dead children,” but her apparent lack of interest in her surviving child challenges the latter reading.⁴³ Comensoli takes a more cynical view, and argues that the Wife’s “puzzling behavior in the final scene” is rooted less in Christian charity (or psychological repression) than pragmatic self-interest:

⁴¹ Cawley and Gaines 20.

⁴² In Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*, one of the most well-known iterations of the patient Griselda story, the abusive Walter’s escalating series of trials ends not with Griselda obediently relinquishing her children to (as she believes) be killed, but in her serving at his putative second wedding after she has been discarded. The greatest possible sacrifice she is called upon to make is not her offspring, but her spouse.

⁴³ Cawley and Gaines 20.

While the emphasis on “the threshold” brings back into relief the domestic space, which has been defiled by the Husband’s crime, the Wife’s limp outburst abates the crime’s enormity... The Husband’s contrition restores his “father’s and forefathers” worthy honours. Likewise, the Wife’s forgiveness of the Husband, a virtue noted twice by the presiding justice, preserves her reputation. More to the point, in a society in which a woman’s property became her husband’s upon marriage, and could be confiscated in punishment for his crimes, the Wife’s public expression of unqualified forgiveness of her husband’s crimes preserves not only her reputation but also her lands.⁴⁴

This *realpolitikal* interpretation of the play’s conclusion may seem at odds with one in which the prodigal Husband’s soul is freed by his Wife’s forgiveness (and implied intercession), but both readings are congruent with idealized early modern notions of companionate marriage, in which husband and wife are an inextricable corporate unit, “one flesh.” Dolan writes that “given the complex associations among the gentle masculine subject, his children, and his property, his murder of his heirs was constructed as an extreme form of ‘social suicide,’” and just as the historical Calverley preserved his remaining estate by sacrificing his body, the Wife’s assertion of marital unity resurrects the Husband’s fallen “house” for the child who will inherit it.⁴⁵ The conceptualization of a family and its property as both a “house” and a “body” “construct[s] subjectivity as collective and diffused, as spread across bodies and through time... This figurative structure encloses many individuals and connects them to one another and to those who proceed and succeed them.”⁴⁶ The Wife’s public declaration of fealty both affirms and ensures that the Calverley family, as a collective subject, will continue

⁴⁴ Viviana Comensoli, “*Household Business*”: *Domestic Plays of Early Modern England* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 102.

⁴⁵ Dolan 154.

⁴⁶ Dolan 157.

through its surviving heir, who will become the new head of the conceptually embodied house after the Husband vacates that role.

IV.

Popular representations of domestic discord among the gentry and “middling” classes divert audiences and readers with real-life scandals while demonstrating the consequences of such disorder. Just as petty treason and maternal infanticide narratives remind husbands to maintain strict control of their households and beware the unruly passions to which women are proverbially disposed, stories of petty tyranny address the masculine authority’s potential to wreak havoc when placed in untrustworthy hands. At the same time, these narratives reinforce the fundamental legitimacy of the patriarchal social order. It was axiomatic that men at all levels of early modern society should wield more power than their wives, children, or servants (if any), but it is worth noting that an ordinary husband’s abuse of his position was parsed in less overtly political terms than a woman’s murder of her spouse. Both crimes are described in the language of treason, but whereas the latter crime inhabited its own legal category and carried a penalty distinct from that for simple murder, the law treated a man who did away with his wife and/or children no differently than if he had killed a stranger. This lack of discursive specificity indicates that while the murder of a wife, child, or other subordinate was decried as an abuse of patriarchal power, it did not pose the same threat to order as a treacherous subordinate. In fact, the petty tyrant might even be seen as reinforcing the *status quo*, albeit in a socially unacceptable manner. Unlike a rebellious woman who “overturns the hierarchy that is supposed to

govern domestic relations, the domestic tyrant grotesquely caricatures his role, expanding the parameters of the patriarch's authority rather than openly challenging domestic hierarchy."⁴⁷ That said, while early modern political theology supported the idea of the household as a "little commonwealth" with the husband and father at its head, there were limits to this domestic rule, as Marianna Muravyeva observes:

The head of the household was thought to possess certain powers in matrimonial matters, but he was subject to public (state) power in all other matters. This created the need for negotiation of limits of both state and familial power in regard to punishment. The sovereign state could not allow any man to exercise powers that were the main function of the state according to the social contract, that is, punishment in the interest of protection; otherwise, the civil state would not differ from the natural state. These negotiations became especially visible in debating the right of the husband to punish his wife.⁴⁸

Coppélia Kahn writes that in Jacobean England, the state had "a direct interest in reinforcing patriarchy in the home" as it sought to replace the feudal era's "baronial loyalty to a family line" with loyalty to the crown: "As part of the same campaign, the state also encouraged obedience to the *paterfamilias* in the home, according to the ancient analogy between state and family, king and father."⁴⁹ But while it is true that "a woman's subjection to her husband's will was a measure of his patriarchal authority and thus of his manliness," masculine authority in the

⁴⁷ Dolan 91.

⁴⁸ Marianna Muravyeva, "'A king in his own household': domestic discipline and family violence in early modern Europe," *The History of the Family* 18.3 (published online September 2013).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1081602X.2013.817349>

⁴⁹ Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculinity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 15.

domestic sphere was not absolute.⁵⁰ Walter Calverley could not claim any divine right of life and death over his household subjects in the way the actual sovereign did over the nation, and by any measure he abused his position and failed in his duty by squandering his estate, attacking his wife, and killing his children. But while neither *A Yorkshire Tragedy* nor *Two Most Unnatural and Bloodie Murthers* excuses their protagonist's behavior, they do attempt to provide some explanation. The dramatized Husband and his broadsheet counterpart fail disastrously as domestic rulers, but in each case their misconduct becomes an occasion for remorse as well as recrimination: the former learns too late the value of what he has thrown away for fear of material discomfort and public opprobrium, while the latter degrades his family's name, honor, and fortunes, only to regret having "ridde the world of beggars" and wish he "hadde those beggars, either...to begge with them, or...to aske heavens almes for mee."⁵¹ Dolan notes that "like accounts of murderous mothers, those of murderous fathers both employ the censorious vocabulary of 'unnatural' and 'monstrous' and find it wanting for transgressions construed in social terms," but while maternal infanticide is often figured as a woman's violation of her husband's property (in the form of heirs), a man who kills his children is less comprehensible, both by reason of the "social suicide" mentioned above, and because the killing of children remained so closely linked with mothers in the popular imagination.⁵²

John Taylor, author of *The Unnaturall Father* (a 1621 account of John

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* 111.

⁵² Dolan 151.

Rowse's murder of his two young daughters) contends that paternal infanticide is especially horrific precisely *because* it is so much less expected than the maternal variety; he also makes it clear that, as in the Calverley case, sinister forces have conspired to bring about his subject's fall from grace. A fishmonger from Ewell, Surrey, Rowse had lived in "good and honest fashion," but soon after marriage fell victim to the devil's "insnares" in the form of a "lewd trull" and her "ungodly embracements," which caused his wife to die of a broken heart.⁵³

Rowse remarried and had two daughters, but unfortunately for them he continued his affair, producing several bastards and bankrupting the family through his unsavory habits: "by his daily riot, excessive drinking and unproportionable spending, his estate began to be much impoverished, much of his land mortgaged and forfeited...[and] his estate and credit being almost past recovery wasted and impaired."⁵⁴ Attempting to escape his creditors, Rowse fled to Ireland and the Low Countries with his mistress, but soon returned "tormented and tossed with restless imaginations," and upon seeing "the poor case of his children, and fearing that worse would befall them hereafter, he resolved to work some means to take away their languishing lives by a speedy and untimely death, the which practice of his, by the devil's instigation and assistance he effected."⁵⁵

Taylor condemns Rowse's killing of his "two very pretty girls, one of the age of six years, and the other four years old," but he is also careful to mention how,

⁵³ John Taylor, *The Unnaturall Father: Or, a Cruell Murther Committed by One John Rowse, of the Town of Ewell, in the County of Surrey upon Two of His Owne Children*, (London: 1621). Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online, image 3. <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Taylor, image 5.

once freed from diabolic interference, Rowse “remained fourteen or fifteen weeks a wonderful penitent prisoner, never, or very seldom, being without a bible or some other good book” and goes on to report that his scaffold confession “moved all that heard him to commiseration and pity” before he “died with great penitency and remorse of conscience.”⁵⁶ In his conclusion, Taylor reasserts the early modern association of child-killing with women, and underscores the inherent paradox of a father who murders his children because they are in “a poor case” of his own making:

It is too manifestly known, what a number of Stepmothers and Strumpets have most inhumanly murdered their Children, and for the same have most deservedly been executed. But in the memory of man (nor scarcely in any History) it is not to be found, that a Father did ever take two Innocent Children out of their beds, and with weeping tears of pitiless pity and unmerciful mercy, to drown them, showing such compassionate cruelty and sorrowful sighing, remorseless remorse in that most unfatherly and unnatural deed.⁵⁷

Taylor attributes Rowse’s wicked behavior “to the malice of the devil,” since no Christian man would otherwise be capable of such “unfatherly and unnatural” acts.⁵⁸ He also sympathizes with his subject’s contrition in much the same way the author of *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* recounts how Walter

⁵⁶ Taylor, image 6-7.

⁵⁷ Taylor, image 8. The author also suggests that Rowse “might have lived and died in better fashion” but for want of spiritual guidance, since Ewell had “neither preacher nor pastor...so that the poor souls dwelling there are in danger of famishing for want of a good preacher to break the Bread of Life unto them. For a sermon amongst them is as rare as warm weather in December or ice in July...And as the wolf is most bold with the sheep when there is either no shepherd or an impotent, insufficient one, so the devil perhaps took his advantage of this wretched man, seeing he was so badly guarded and so weakly guided to withstand his force and malice; for where God is least known and called upon, there Satan hath most power and domination.”

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Calverley, having killed his sons in a misguided effort to prevent “the extirpation of his family, [and] the ruine of his antient house...repented all the day, and...lamented all the night: nor can all the penne of the divinest Poet expresse halfe the griefe in wordes, that he conceives in heart.”⁵⁹ Taylor’s bizarre string of paradoxes in the passage above creates a similar tension between the heinousness of the act itself and its perpetrator’s tortured state of mind; compare this uneasy conflict between sympathy and condemnation with the language in *A Pittlesse Mother*, which vilifies Margaret Vincent as “tygrous,” “a fierce and bloody Medea,” and “a creature not deserving mother’s name” for murdering her two young sons “to save their souls (as she vainly thought).”⁶⁰ Although the pamphlet’s narrator reports that Vincent eventually repented her crime and thus regained hope of divine forgiveness, there is no mention of her penitential speeches moving onlookers to pity, or any direct quotations from those speeches. Walter Calverley, John Rowse, and Margaret Vincent all effect the “ruin” of their children, but while Vincent’s crime is explained as the result of Roman Catholic influence followed by diabolic interference (both of which she later repudiated), the murderous mother’s confused mental and spiritual state is afforded far less sympathy or understanding than that of the murderous fathers; neither is there any suggestion that Vincent suffered from any humoral imbalance or weakness beyond the archetypal female susceptibility to malign influence.

Vanessa McMahon suggests that this double standard was rooted in, and

⁵⁹ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* 105; 110.

⁶⁰ Anonymous. *A Pittlesse Mother That at One Time Murdered Two of Her Own Children at Acton, etc.* London: 1616. Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online, image 4. <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

complicated by, the fact that certain types of masculine violence were expected and valorized in early modern society, whereas physical aggression in women was socially illegible and more likely to be seen as subversive and willfully malicious:

Like killer mothers, fathers were not supposed to kill their children and could be easily demonized in print for doing so. However, the effective condemnation of a father's action was more complex than it was for mothers. The killing itself was not enough to prove their wickedness: they had to kill without provocation in an extreme manner or...kill several of their children at once if they were to receive the same kind of condemnatory language as killer mothers. Men were expected to be violent and to correct family members physically. A jury would need to be convinced that they were acting in excess of this permissible violence, and with permissible intent, before they could thoroughly condemn them. Mothers who killed found it difficult to escape accusations of malice; fathers were never perceived in such uncomplicated ways.⁶¹

The murderous father exerted a different sort of fascination than his female counterpart; a mother who killed her children betrayed her "natural" maternal identity as a nurturer, while a father who did so abused his equally "natural" (and appropriate) power to discipline and control his subordinates. Although the historical record contains numerous cases of maternal infanticide committed by "honest" mothers and what Taylor terms "Stepmothers and Strumpets" alike, there are no extant theatrical depictions of an actual case in which a woman killed her child, despite the greater volume of prose accounts of such crimes. By contrast, the Calverley murders generated two separate plays in the years immediately following the event: *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and George Wilkins' *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1607), which focuses on the potential frustrations and disappointments of arranged unions, and ends on a (relatively) comic note of

⁶¹ Vanessa McMahon, *Murder in Shakespeare's England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 151.

reconciliation rather than in bloodshed, demonic possession, and execution.

Writing about the disparity between stage representations of murderous fathers and their female counterparts, Dolan suggests that:

The privileged status of the drama relative to other popular materials, heightened in the case of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* by its attribution to Shakespeare and, most recently, to Middleton, makes these dramatizations of the Calverley case more widely known and carefully studied than any of the representations of murderous mothers. But this phenomenon of cultural transmission obscures the fact that the murderous mother was a much more familiar figure in early modern popular culture, if not on the stage, than the murderous father.⁶²

It may be that, given his conceptual role as household sovereign, a family patriarch's lethal violence against his subjects was considered a more noteworthy crime as well as a more surprising one, and that the playhouse's scope for granting characters subjectivity (and potentially eliciting sympathy) by letting characters express their point of view and plead their case "in open presence" was considered more edifying: a microcosmic view of the state gone awry through weakness or instability, the petty tyrant's punishment and remorse, and the eventual restoration of order.⁶³ Ariane M. Balizet observes that a well-governed state, household, and family were all frequently figured as a healthy, properly functioning body, which was invariably figured as male:

The notion that the husband's body should be the focal point of domestic order and disorder...was a common topic of sixteenth-century non-dramatic domestic literature. This field of literature...embraced the axiomatic principle that the household was itself a body of which the husband was the head. Domestic literature explored the full range of

⁶² Dolan 153.

⁶³ Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penniless, His Supplication to the Devil* (London: Printed by Abell Jesses, 1592), 30.

http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Nashe/Pierce_Penillesse.pdf

possibilities presented by the analogy of household and body to emphasize the husband's superiority, authority, and responsibility.⁶⁴

In a 1609 speech to Parliament, James I engaged directly with this theme in the most politically and theologically privileged terms, declaring that "In the Scriptures Kings are called Gods, and so their power after a certaine relation compared to the Diuine power. Kings are also compared to Fathers of families: for a King is trewly *Parens patriae*, the politique father of his people. And lastly, Kings are compared to the head of this Microcosme of the body of man."⁶⁵

Further down the social scale, conduct manuals, treatises on marriage, and other forms of popular polemical literature also played on this analogy to reinforce prevailing ideas about the domestic ruler's inherently superior moral and intellectual properties. In his 1622 treatise, *Of Domesticall Duties*, the Puritan clergyman and polemicist William Gouge (himself the father of thirteen children) addresses the idea in detail:

A wife must submit her selfe to an husband, because he is her head: and she must doe it as to the Lord, because her husband is to her, as Christ is to the Church. The metaphor of an head declareth two points:

1. As an head is more eminent and excellent than the body, and placed aboue it, so is an husband to his wife.
2. As an head, by the vnderstanding which is in it, gouerneth, protecteth, preserueth, prouideth for the body, so doth the husband his wife: at least he ought so to doe: for this is his office and duty: this is here noted to

⁶⁴ Ariane M. Balizet, *Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama: Domestic Identity on the Renaissance Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 55.

⁶⁵ James I, "A Speech to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament at White-Hall, on Wednesday the XXI of March, Anno 1609, in *King James VI and I: Political Writings* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought) ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 181.

shew the benefit which a wife receiueth by her husband: so as two motiues are included vnder this metaphor.

The first is taken from the husbands prerogatiue, whence note that Subiection must be yeelded to such as are ouer vs. For this is a maine end of the difference betweene partie and partie. To what end is the head set about the body, if the body be not subiect to it?

The second is taken from the benefit which a wife reapeth by her husbands superiority: and it sheweth that They who will not submit themselues to their superiours are iniurious to themselues: as the body were iniurious to it selfe, if it would not be subiect to the head.⁶⁶

According to this paradigm, what Balizet terms “somatic domesticity” was literally embodied by the man whose roles as husband, father, and the master of servants were perfectly balanced to most effectively apply patriarchal power.⁶⁷ That being the case, it is unsurprising that an “unstayed” or despotic husband made a compelling subject for playhouse audiences. Even the groundlings understood that a weak, unstable, or morally corrupt ruler was a dangerous ruler, and domestic dramas like *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, *Arden of Faversham*, and *A Warning for Fair Women* shone a light on the dysfunctional state writ small, demonstrating its ill effects at the local level in much the same way late Elizabethan history plays—drawing on texts such as the chronicle histories of Raphael Holinshed and John Stow and the didactic poem collection *A Mirror for Magistrates*—celebrated national heroes like Henry V and told cautionary tales of tragically feckless medieval kings such as Edward II, Richard II, Henry VI, and the notoriously tyrannous Richard III. As Balizet writes:

⁶⁶ William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London: 1622), 1.1.29-30. Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online.

<http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

⁶⁷ Balizet 56.

Renaissance dramatists repeatedly portrayed ideas of domesticity in relation to larger cultural institutions including the monarchy, the Reformation, and England's national identity as a Protestant homeland...down to the individual household as the smallest stratum of order...The analogy between home and state, then, was understood in explicitly religious terms, which is to say that the properly governed household and the realm of England were related manifestations of divine order.⁶⁸

Plays had a distinct advantage over other popular media in being able to *show* a story rather than merely telling it, and the theatre was in a unique position to repackage and process troubling issues and events in the real world via the public spectacle of the stage. The playhouse's capacity to reanimate the past—whether the assassination of a Roman emperor or the machinations of a bourgeois petty traitor—lent the material an immediacy no pamphlet, broadside ballad, or dusty historical record could match. Like chronicles and exemplary literature, plays about “bad” kings were not intended to critique the divinely ordained institution of monarchy itself (certainly not in explicit terms); instead, they served a didactic purpose by illustrating how things could go amiss if sovereign power was abused or placed in incompetent hands. The same was true of household dramas like *Arden of Faversham* and *Yorkshire Tragedy*, which sought not to question the analogical framing of the family as an embodied miniature state or the husband's God-given place as its head, but to show the consequences of weak, cruel, or ineffectual patriarchal authority, and to remind audiences that such power was subject to limitations, even—or perhaps especially—in a culture where the family was a profoundly “politicized institution; made to serve as an analogy for virtually

⁶⁸ Balizet 7.

all other relations in society.”⁶⁹

V.

Frighteningly erratic husbands and fathers appeared in a variety of theatrical genres, and were frequently undone by the same classic mixture of masculine anxieties: the loss (whether real or imagined) of political, personal, physical, and mental strength, sexual jealousy, and the omnipresent threats of cuckoldry and bastardy. Shakespeare’s plays feature a number of male characters that undergo a transformation from affectionate partner or father to abusive oppressor when they imagine their authority is threatened. Kahn observes that patriarchy appears to grant “near-absolute legal and political powers” to husbands and fathers, “particularly powers over women. Yet in unacknowledged ways it conceded to women, who were essential to its continuance, the power to validate men’s identities through their obedience, and fidelity as wives and daughters.”⁷⁰ Female characters frequently bear the brunt of an insecure protagonist’s tyrannous behavior, and no matter how mild, compliant, or reassuring their response to the abuse, they are unable to halt its escalation. Othello goes from universally admired military leader and loving husband to violent bully, unhinged by Iago’s spurious accusations against Desdemona to the point where he strikes his wife in public and finally kills her in their marriage bed, where (the play strongly implies) their union remains forever unconsummated. King Lear has no spouse to abuse, but he banishes Cordelia for failing to flatter him, hurls misogynist curses at his two elder daughters, and reviles women in general as “centaurs” below the waist:

⁶⁹ Breitenberg 17.

⁷⁰ Kahn 12.

“there’s hell, there’s darkness / There is the sulphurous pit” (*King Lear*, 4.6.125-26). Even within a comedy’s marriage plot, Claudio moves with alarming speed from calling Hero “the sweetest lady ever I looked on” to violently rejecting her as a “rotten orange” and “approved wanton” because she is rumored to have “talked with a man out at a window,” a falsehood her father is so quick to believe that he wishes his only child had never been born: “Grieved I, I had but one? / Chid I for that at frugal nature’s frame? / Oh, one too much by thee. Why had I one?” (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 1.154; 4.1.31; 4.1.43; 4.1.304; 4.1.125-27).

The Winter’s Tale presents a particularly horrific portrait of sexual jealousy turned to tyranny in Leontes, a king so convinced his wife Hermione is pregnant with his best friend’s child that he becomes a terrifying despot, feared by his entire court. Relying only on his own fantasies, he attempts to have his putative rival assassinated, imprisons his Hermione and forbids her access to their young son, orders that her newborn child be abandoned and exposed, sends his faithful retainer on a suicide mission, and subjects his wife to a degrading post-partum trial, with disastrous consequences for himself, his family, and the kingdom of Sicilia. David Cressy points out how Leontes compounds his cruelty by denying Hermione “the childbed privilege of seclusion, dragging her from her chamber and subjecting her to public examination and humiliation while she is still ‘green’” (experiencing post-parturition bleeding), in defiance of social norms that granted mothers a month’s respite to recover from the ordeal of labor and delivery: a gratuitously vicious twist that must have horrified early modern

audiences, especially female playgoers.⁷¹ Hurried without ceremony from her bed, Hermione decries this premature exposure to the court's gaze, mere moments after her infant daughter is taken from her:

The innocent milk in its most innocent mouth,
Haled out to murder: myself on every post
Proclaimed a strumpet: with immodest hatred
The child-bed privilege denied, which 'longs
To women of all fashion; lastly, hurried
Here to this place, i' the open air, before
I have got strength of limit.
(*The Winter's Tale*, 3.2.98-104)

The play punishes Leontes for his tyrannical behavior, but it does not remove him from power. His rejection of the oracle at Delphi's verdict declaring Hermione's innocence is followed by the news of his son Mamillius' death and his wife's (apparently) fatal collapse, and an ensuing sixteen years in which he believes his dynasty will end with him; since it is assumed Hermione's infant daughter is dead, "the King shall / live without an heir if that which is lost be not / found" (*WT*, 3.2.144-146). Chastened and humbled, Leontes is ultimately reconciled with Hermione and the abandoned Perdita—"lost," as Dolan points out, not by accident but "through her father's violent, purposeful action"—returns and marries the son of his imagined rival, the King of Bohemia, thereby ensuring the survival of his "house."⁷² But Leontes and Hermione's only son is *genuinely* lost, rendering the play's restoration of order and patrilineal succession compromised and incomplete.

⁷¹ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 205.

⁷² Dolan 121

In his discussion of Burton's correlation of melancholy and sexual insecurity as inextricably essential components of male love and desire, Breitenberg argues that jealousy—rather than an inevitable product of men's "volatile fluidity"—is "an anxiety and a potential source of violence engendered in men by an economy that constructs masculine identity as dependent on the coercive and symbolic regulation of women's sexuality."⁷³ This overwhelming urge to regulate women's sexuality, combined with the difficulty of knowing whether a woman is chaste, or by whom her children were begotten, leads the men in these plays to overcompensate for what they perceive as their weakened authority by abusing it. As Balizet observes:

Anxieties of cuckoldry loom over households in Renaissance drama, and sexual betrayal represents a violent challenge to household security and integrity in the form of the cuckold's horns. Through the bodies of cuckolded, weakened, imperfect husbands, we may witness dramatic apprehension of somatic domesticity and the sites of vulnerability that are exposed when members of the household body are given voice and agency onstage... The embodied household is itself degraded, and ultimately dismembered, once the head is made to wear the horns of the cuckold.⁷⁴

If, as Breitenberg maintains, "sexual jealousy is both constitutive and symptomatic of the normative operations of early modern patriarchy rather than an aberration," it is virtually impossible for the analogical household sovereign to avoid becoming a tyrant if he hopes to maintain control of his subjects and domain, but in doing so, he risks destroying the very "house" he hopes to preserve.⁷⁵

⁷³ Breitenberg 175.

⁷⁴ Balizet 66.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

We have seen how a powerful but insecure man's descent into autocracy comes at a moral, emotional, and material cost; on the playhouse stage, it often comes at a linguistic cost as well, with internal disintegration represented by disrupted speech patterns and reduced coherence. As these characters become more convinced that their wives are unfaithful, their children are illegitimate, and their power is waning, there is a corresponding decline in articulation. Verbal tics and repetitions, along with a general coarsening and misogynist sexualizing of language, are external markers of internal turmoil. Othello's psychological unraveling reduces the rhetorical skills with which he wooed Desdemona and defended himself against witchcraft accusations to shouts of "O, blood, blood, blood!" and "Goats and monkeys!" and after his wonted eloquence returns at the play's end, he identifies himself as "he that was Othello" (*Othello*, 3.3.446; 4.1.250; 5.2.277). Leontes begins the play using shorter, less elaborate sentences than Hermione or his erstwhile friend Polixenes, but his diction soon becomes disjointed and brutal. In fewer than one hundred lines Leontes moves from his first suspicious "Too hot, too hot!" to declaring himself "o'er head and ears a forked one" whose wife has been "sluiced in's absence, / And his pond fished by his next neighbor" *The Winter's Tale* (1.1.108; 185). By the end of the scene he openly doubts his children's paternity—confusing his young son with talk of cuckold's horns and questions like "Art thou my calf?"—and denounces Hermione as "a hobby-horse, deserves a name / As rank as any flax-wench that puts to / Before her troth-plight" (*WT*, 1.1.193-94; 127; 276-78).

It is worth noting that Leontes finally regains his senses through the offices of

a woman, although in his case (unlike the Husband in *A Yorkshire Tragedy*) that woman is not his wife, and she is neither patient nor forbearing. Paulina, the widow of Autolycus (“pursued by a bear” to his death after abandoning the infant Perdita) is not afraid of the king’s rage, and while Leontes “casts himself as the victim of a ‘nest of traitors’...Paulina repeatedly calls Leontes a tyrant and a traitor to himself, identifying ‘these dangerous unsafe lunes i’ the King (*WT*, 2.2.30) as the source of disorder.”⁷⁶ Iago’s wronged wife, Emilia, performs a similar function in *Othello*, castigating the Moor for Desdemona’s murder in the roundest possible terms:

O gull! O dolt,
As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed—
I care not for thy sword. I’ll make thee known,
Though I lost twenty lives
(*Othello*, 5.2.158-161)

While Emilia’s chastisement of Othello is rendered problematic by its racism—she also asserts that Desdemona was “too fond of her most filthy bargain”—these outspoken women act as a counterweight to the mild, obedient, and victimized wives they serve (*Othello*, 5.2.153). Emilia acknowledges her own spousal insurrection, publicly refusing to submit to Iago given his Machiavellian behavior: “‘Tis proper I obey him—but not now. / Perchance, Iago, I will ne’er go home” (5.2.193-194). Through the words and actions of these subordinate female characters, the injustice and violence perpetrated upon conventionally “good” wives by abusive husbands is addressed without compromising the victims’ blameless, praiseworthy forbearance. Although tyranny is an egregious abuse of

⁷⁶ Dolan 165.

power, these plays allocate such remonstrations to married women who push back against the institution: Paulina voices her opinions even as her husband is ordered to silence her and she is threatened with burning, while Emilia questions the hypocritical double standard that holds women accountable for actions men commit without consequences:

And have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well. Else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.
(*Othello*, 4.3.95-98)

VI.

Like Othello and Leontes, the Husband in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* exhibits incoherent speech laced with rampant misogyny, but he differs from Shakespeare's troubled protagonists in that he begins the play in a fallen state. His disordered language reflects his pre-existing inner chaos, both of which intensify as he draws closer to attacking his family. The play's opening scene features three gossiping servants who discuss how the Husband beats his wife, calls her "whore as familiarly as one would call Moll and Doll, and his children bastards as naturally as can be," and "owes more than his skin's worth," making it clear that his reprehensible behavior is common knowledge (1.44-45; 1.50). Returning home after gambling away a large sum of money, the Husband's first speech is already filled with cursing and repetition:

Pox o' th' last throw!
Five hundred angels vanish from my sight.
I'm damned, I'm damned, the angels have forsook me!
Nay, 'tis certainly true, for he that has
No coin is damned in this world. He's gone, he's gone!
(*A Yorkshire Tragedy*, 2.25-27).

When the long-suffering Wife asks the cause of his “discontent,” he insults her, kicks her, and blames her for his losses: “A vengeance strip thee naked, thou art cause, / Effect, quality, property, thou, thou, thou!” (2.34-35). The Husband’s penchant for staccato, repetitive outbursts on several obsessive themes (money, cuckoldry, poverty, status) gives him a distinctive voice compared to the play’s other characters, who exist mostly to react to, admonish, and—in the Wife’s case—forgive his misdeeds.⁷⁷ These verbal tics are present whether he is alone or speaking to others, as illustrated by his comments about his family in a soliloquy and his response to the Wife’s return from London with what he expects will be the proceeds of her dowry:

I hate the very hour I chose a wife:
A trouble, trouble!
Three children like three evils hang upon me.
Fie, fie, fie!
(2.99-102)

Now, are you come? Where’s the money? Let’s see the money. Is the rubbish sold, those wiseacres your lands? The money, where is’t? Pour’t down, down with it, down with it: I say, pour’t on the ground! Let’s see’t, let’s see’t!
(3.34-37)

The Husband continually erupts with phrases like “O, beggary, beggary!” and “Money, money, money!” He dismisses his children as “bastards, bastards, bastards; begot in tricks, begot in tricks!” and cries “Bleed, bleed, rather than beg,

⁷⁷ In a recent (and as yet unpublished) paper, Nora Corrigan makes some interesting points about how the Husband’s repetitions may function simultaneously as cues to the other players, while serving to heighten the audience’s sense of his unpredictability and omnipresent danger in performance.

beg!” as he stabs his eldest son (2.50; 2.57; 2.65).⁷⁸ These speech patterns, often paired with physical abuse, escalate until the play’s final scene of repentance and reconciliation, when the Husband’s delivery becomes far more measured. As order is restored within the world of the play via the rule of law, the Husband’s penitence and reclamation, and the Wife’s preservation of the ancestral “house” for the surviving heir, right reason returns to the Husband. This shift from furious ranting to calm resignation recalls Breitenberg’s “bubbling cauldron” of masculine anxieties, which he characterizes as

a language of unresolvable contradictions and paradoxes, a world gray and ambivalent rather than clear and categorizable, To the extent that we may say ‘order’ prevailed, it did so...because anxiety, paradox, and contradiction could be assimilated, assuaged, contained, or put to some productive use.⁷⁹

The Husband’s psychological, spiritual, and verbal disorder can be said to serve “some productive use” by demonstrating the disastrous outcome of incompetent domestic sovereignty (for the household and the petty tyrant himself), and by offering a return to stability as the patriarch recognizes and repents his wrongdoing. But this resolution occurs without any suggestion that the social paradigm enabling such abuse played a role in the disaster. The departure of diabolic influence—“now glides the devil from me, / Departs at every joint, heaves up my nails”—is implemented by the Wife’s forgiveness, not by any admission of ineptitude on the Husband’s part, and certainly not by any critique of

⁷⁸ See also the soliloquy quoted on page 2-3, in which the Husband repeats the phrase “very well” and the words “moon,” “mine,” “down,” “waning,” and “generations” two or three times each in a speech of only eleven lines.

⁷⁹ Breitenberg 1.

a system that places power in the hands of an “unstayed younge man” who wastes his inheritance, beats his wife, and kills his children (10.18-19). “Demonizing the murderous husband as a lunatic exception, refusing to reflect on the potential for abuse built into marriage or the imbalances of power within the household,” this elision of the analogical scheme’s potential to cause misery and even death for the petty tyrant’s dependents willfully ignores the possibility that the system itself is innately problematic, and instead assigns blames to its local representatives.⁸⁰

Despite their widely divergent degrees of prestige and power, domestic and state authority were aligned in critical ways: a male heir was expected to assume control upon his father’s death, and in so doing became responsible for the preservation and continuation of his ancestral line and embodied “house.” Coming on the heels of forty-five years of female rule and uncertain succession, the conceptual importance placed on the smooth patrilineal transfer of power in this period was enormous. This residual anxiety helps to explain why narratives that showcase “bad” rulers at the domestic level present their subjects as anomalous case studies rather than symptomatic of the analogical concept in practice. As Peter Lake writes, “the originating sins in these narratives stem from misuse, in some cases the tyrannical abuse, of what remain inherently legitimate patriarchal powers,” and while Walter Calverley (along with his theatrical counterpart) became the subject of scandal and an object of censure, there is never any suggestion that the system that produced him should be changed.⁸¹ Indeed, as the seventeenth century progressed there was a growing appetite for these

⁸⁰ Dolan 14.

⁸¹ Lake 80.

narratives, and the Jacobean and Caroline eras showed as much interest in petty tyrants as the Elizabethans had in accounts of petty treason.

This fascination with husbands and fathers who overreach their rightful authority in the domestic sphere was likely spurred by the increasing likelihood of rebellion and revolution in the political realm. As Dolan writes, in the years leading up to the English Civil War, as respectable householders and landowners prepared to mount an insurrection against the increasingly autocratic Charles I, these men “exercised increasing control over their own dependents, those potential home-rebels and house-traitors. Even those men who were involved in what could be construed as treason—regicide—did not see their wives’ and servants’ positions as any way analogous to their own.”⁸² She further notes that in Milton’s 1643/1644 *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, the committed Parliamentarian “asserts the necessity of reinforcing *domestic* patriarchal authority even as he formulates his radical arguments...that a covenant is only legitimate and binding while it satisfies the terms under which it was proposed.”⁸³ In this way, Milton “uses the analogy between domestic and political life to authorize the legislative reform of marital relations to validate the *husband’s* claims to domestic happiness,” while never appearing to consider the possibility that women might want to dissolve a contract that no longer satisfied “the terms under which it was proposed.”⁸⁴

⁸² Dolan 74.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Dolan 74 (emphasis in the original).

Stories of household sovereigns unhinged by jealousy, lunacy, supernatural interference, or perceived threats to their authority provided object lessons in how not to run a domestic commonwealth. Just as the petty traitor embodied Elizabethan anxieties about a microcosmic state made topsy-turvy by women who violently seized power, the petty tyrant reflected an imperative to reinforce patriarchal order on the home front as the authority of the king himself (“the head of this Microcosme of the body of man”) was called into question and ultimately overturned. If a father who murdered his offspring was “unnatural” in subverting his duty of care, a scenario in which a kingdom’s subjects—its conceptual children—killed their father constituted a wholesale revolt against order. Rather than draw parallels between the actions of revolutionary householders and the husband-killing “home rebels” of petty treason narratives, accounts of petty tyranny focus on men who destroy their embodied houses by abusing their God-given power in extreme and egregious ways, thereby tacitly justifying the removal of a despot from power. But while representations of murderous husbands and fathers invariably end with the tyrant’s deposition and punishment, these texts “avoid implying that marriage is arbitrary, tyrannous, and exploitative, or that wives’ rebellion might be justified.”⁸⁵ To the contrary, they are careful to reconstitute and transfer traditional masculine authority into new hands once its flawed representative is removed. With his final words, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*’s Husband admonishes the audience: “Let every father look into my deeds, / And then their heirs may prosper while mine bleeds” (10.59-60). But although his first

⁸⁵ Ibid.

and second sons “bleed,” the youngest one survives to (eventually) assume his lawful role as head of the household. The irresponsible, abusive petty tyrant is deposed, but his domestic sovereignty and conceptual power continue via the established tradition of patrilineal descent, even in the face of political revolution. The patriarch—even the king himself—may be dead, but the patriarchy lives on.

Afterword: The More Things Change

A house is never apolitical. It is conceived, constructed, occupied, and policed by people with power, needs, and fears.¹

Stories of domestic crime expose and underscore (often occluded) fears about the most fundamental human institutions: home, family, and community. In early modern England, the explicit, highly gendered analogical framing of the individual household as a reflection of the state politicized anxieties about order, stability, and the survival of the patriarchal “house.” Then as now, it was simultaneously frightening and titillating to think such threats might be hiding in plain sight within the place we feel most safe, and contemporary accounts of familial violence continue to address concerns about the power paradigms and personal dynamics that shape our closest relationships. Although the characterization of the home as a man’s castle has largely disappeared from mainstream notions of household management, a husband who murders his wife for suspected infidelity enacts the same anxieties about masculine authority, status, and identity that informed such crimes in earlier periods. The popular press continues to portray a mother who kills her children in terms that invoke the unnatural and the monstrous. As in early modern pamphlets, plays, and ballads, a woman who murders her husband today is often assumed to have been unfaithful. Contemporary accounts may also suggest that violent wives have been victims of spousal abuse, which early modern reporters considered a form of tyranny. Tudor,

¹ Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019), 76.

Stuart, and Caroline accounts highlight the spiritual, political, and supernatural implications of the crimes they depict, whereas current stories of domestic violence tend to stress their subjects' emotional and psychological states, and give special emphasis to the criminals' personal circumstances. Early modern crime narratives place the culprits' misdeeds and punishment in a broader social context for their audience's edification, and to reinforce notions of a divinely ordained patriarchal order. The solipsism that inheres in modern notions of individualism would be deeply alien to the communal sensibilities of early modern pamphlet writers, who present their subjects as exemplary "types" from whose examples readers should take a lesson, "forgive, and forget."²

But in some ways popular approaches to domestic violence have remained strikingly consistent. While the intervening centuries have altered the material presentation of such stories, and excised much (if not all) of the overtly religious rhetoric in which they were once couched, the "true relation" pamphlets' oscillating tones of sensationalist reportage and pious censure are recognizable in today's news coverage of murders within families. These echoes are particularly clear when children are involved, a mother has been negligent or violent, and/or the father is an apparent pillar of his community who falls from grace.³ Similarly,

² Anonymous. *A Pittilesse Mother That at One Time Murdered Two of Her Own Children at Acton, etc.* London: 1616. Tufts University Libraries, Early English Books Online, image 12.

<http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/home>

³ Consider the 2011 trial of Casey Anthony for the 2008 murder of her three-year-old daughter. The prosecution portrayed the mother as a reckless, neglectful party girl who killed the child to pursue her own pleasure; Anthony's acquittal met with widespread public outrage. Alan Hawes' 2016 murder of his family and subsequent suicide shocked his small Irish village, where Hawes was a school

the poetic license taken by early modern domestic tragedies and ventriloquized confessional ballads has been repackaged in forms ranging from the scandal-filled novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—which frequently feature the sorts of “ruined” women, irresponsible rakes, abusive husbands, and exploited children who figured in news scandals—to “fact-based” television dramas and the popular publishing genre known as “tragic life stories.” It is clear that tales of homes, families, and intimate relationships turned upside down have long exerted a powerful pull on the public imagination, and I would like to conclude this study by examining how portrayals of violence in the home have changed and/or remained consistent between the early modern period and our own historical moment, and what such differences and similarities might reveal about enduring cultural tastes and social anxieties.

In their exploration of crime reporting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Ken MacMillan and Melissa Glass note that ephemeral printed accounts were “the most common way that English people gained knowledge of serious crime” in this period.⁴ True crime writing appeared in a variety of sub-genres, including “small pamphlets, broadsides, rhyming ballads designed to be sung to a familiar tune, ministers’ accounts of criminals and repentance, collections of

headmaster with a reputation as a devout Catholic and exemplary family man. These cases dominated the news cycles, with Anthony emerging as an unnatural monster who wrongly escaped the wages of sin, and Hawes as a deeply troubled man who killed his wife, children, and himself rather than face pending opprobrium for his secret pornography habit. Both killers’ child victims were characterized as “angels in heaven,” “precious innocents,” etc.

⁴ Ken MacMillan and Melissa Glass, “Murder and Mutilation in Early-Stuart England: A Case Study in Crime Reporting,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (27. 2, 2016): 63.

trials, newspapers, and biographies of professional criminals,” and they enjoyed an equally broad appeal:

These tales satiated a huge appetite for stories of true crime in late Tudor and Stuart England. To do so, they had to be shocking, entertaining, and instructive, simultaneously upsetting the readers’ sensibilities, vicariously fulfilling their private desires for stories of crime and criminals, and warning readers about the wages of sin as well as the ultimate providence of God and authority of the church and state. These texts served as cautionary, religious, and morality tales that reflected on serious crime as one of the signs that English society had become ignorant, irreligious, and immoral. This was a society that placed significant constraints on sexual, personal, and religious freedoms, and exhorted obedience, orderliness, deference, hard work, sexual restraint, and abstinence from all forms of vice. The crime pamphlet genre thus served as a metaphor for the social, political, and religious issues of the day, and was the principal means by which people of late-Tudor and Stuart England gained knowledge of national criminal activity.⁵

The multivalent function of these texts is a remarkable testament to their authors’ and publishers’ marketing savvy. By combining entertainment, horror, outrage, and cautionary didacticism (with a taste of chastisement), crime pamphlets catered to a wide range of tastes. For a nominal cost, these cheaply produced tracts and chapbooks also offered reassurance that the patriarchal Christian order and the authority of the state were immutable and permanent, despite the challenges posed by a wicked age. Given the many social, political, and religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the restoration of order that typically closes these pamphlets must have provided a comforting antidote to their disturbing (yet excitingly voyeuristic) subject matter. The narrators’ conviction that “English society had become ignorant, irreligious, and immoral” strikes a chord with anyone living through volatile times, and these narratives’ neat

⁵ MacMillan and Glass 64.

resolutions—the punishment and repentance of the murderers, and pious exhortations that the reader eschew the criminals’ sinful path—gave audiences the vicarious thrill of wickedness with none of the consequences and a dose of moral instruction, all for the price of a few pennies.⁶

The cheapness of these printed materials is worth noting, since their relatively low status was connected to their ephemeral, shoddy quality as well as their scandalous content. Peter Lake points out that although crime pamphlets frequently deploy religious rhetoric (and serve as a means of social control by illustrating the wages of wrongdoing), they are distinct from the “cheap godly pamphlets of the period,” which were similarly priced but more explicitly moralizing in their tone and content.⁷ These Protestant or Puritan chapbooks often took the form of an extended analogy, such as *The will of the devil, with his x. detestable commaundements* (circa 1566), in which Satan bequeaths sub-standard tools to tradesmen and artisans in order to encourage unethical practices, help them cozen customers, and enable them to spend their ill-gotten gains in idle habits such as dicing and whoring. These “godly” ephemera also included instructional pamphlets for children prescribing correct behavior at home, worship, and school, and another sub-genre that might be termed post-Reformation versions of the (now forbidden) medieval saint’s life, such as the polemicist Philip Stubbes’s much-reprinted *A cristal glasse for Christian women* (1591), an account of his wife Katherine’s blameless life, patient suffering, and

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Peter Lake, *The Anti-Christ’s Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists, and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 3.

exemplary death in childbirth at the age of twenty.⁸ Lake observes that, just as the title pages of godly pamphlets clarify their contents for potential buyers, popular crime narratives' lurid rhetoric indicates the "clear audience expectations which such titles and woodcuts were no doubt intended to create, and to which they were also designed to pander."⁹ The mass production and brisk sales of these pamphlets demonstrate how "a distinct market niche had been carved out for murder stories," and Lake goes on to note these texts' influence on the early modern entertainment industry:

As a genre...the pamphlets spilled over into the other great popular medium of the age. A number of pamphlet narratives made the transition to the stage and indeed received further memorialization in print in play texts very often based quite closely on their pamphlet precursors...the pamphlets and the plays based on them most obviously belong to the popular stage and proto-Grub Street, the bottom end of the market where publication was for profit and the consequent aim was to pander to popular taste.¹⁰

The relatively "trashy" appeal of such material should be familiar to modern audiences, who are as fascinated by tales of murder and mayhem as their historical counterparts were. Domestic violence cases receive widespread coverage across a range of media in the present day, but with the obvious difference that current reporters of such crimes have immeasurably greater access to the facts of the cases. In her analysis of early modern "news" and reading

⁸ For a comprehensive study of godly pamphlets, see Tessa Watt's *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁹ Lake 3.

¹⁰ Ibid. As shown in my comparisons of *Arden of Faversham* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* with their prose sources, such dramatic appropriations frequently combine close adherence to the "true" accounts with various degrees of poetic license, whether for dramatic effect, to enhance a didactic agenda, or to shield the living relatives of a characters' real-life prototype, etc.

practices, Frances E. Dolan writes that in pamphlet literature, “the most common title is the ‘true relation,’ sometimes intensified as the true and perfect or true and exact,” and proposes using “that ubiquitous phrase as a provocation for thinking about truth in and as relation.”¹¹ While most pamphlets declare themselves authoritative sources, there is little extant official information about most of the crimes they report beyond the texts themselves. (The survival of Walter Calverley’s recorded examination after killing his sons and Holinshed’s lengthy commentary on Thomas Arden’s murder testify to the enormous notoriety of those particular scandals.) As MacMillan and Glass note, given “the sparse nature of archival sources about serious crime at this time...[and] the absence of corroborating evidence...the issue then comes down to seventeenth-century readers’ willingness to believe or disbelieve what they were reading.”¹² Dolan observes that some contemporary accounts seem to propose that their readers “find or make the truth using the materials they supply.” Broadening her argument to suggest a model for modern readers, she writes:

This relational reading practice...unpredictably but robustly relates texts to events and persons and feelings, prescription to practice, fiction to fact, description to experience, thus muddying distinctions that structure many of our assumptions about early modern texts...This reading practice is not confined to the early modern period; indeed, I am arguing that we take it as our own model. But it emerges out of the particular circumstances of that time and place...[painting] a picture of the early modern reader as active, creative, impertinent, opportunistic, and unpredictable.”¹³

¹¹ Frances E. Dolan, *True Relations: Reading, Literature, and Evidence in Seventeenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 2.

¹² MacMillan and Glass 65.

¹³ Dolan 10.

Dolan’s characterization of the reception and judgment of reportage—in the early modern era and our own—as a collaborative two-way street, which “places an onus on the reader, who must decide whether a relation is true for him- or herself,” is especially compelling in our own post-modern era of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” when consumers increasingly choose not only which sources to believe as “true relations,” but what constitutes truth itself.¹⁴

Indeed, although modern news sources have more numerous sources of information than the writers of pamphlets and chronicles (archival footage; living eye-witnesses; recorded confessions and/or testimony from criminals), this plethora of available platforms arguably makes the water as muddy as it was for their predecessors. Moreover, the journalistic standards of early modern “reporters” are likely more analogous to today’s sensational supermarket papers and tabloid television shows than to more sober or prestigious outlets. The shocking woodcuts and highly charged title page descriptions evoke the headlines and salacious photos on the cover of *The National Enquirer* or *The Daily Mirror*, and if prose accounts of early modern domestic crimes caution readers against disorder and wrongdoing to reinforce the model of the home as an orderly micro-state, tabloid papers are also known for espousing an aggressively conservative agenda. Stoking fears about illegal immigration, corrupt politicians, kidnappings, space aliens, and an increasingly immoral world in which “old-fashioned values” are under continual threat, tabloids echo their early modern counterparts by giving readers an exciting glimpse of their worst nightmares: frightening, unseemly, yet

¹⁴ Dolan 7.

exciting situations in which *they* would never be found. These readily available, popular printed materials are alike in being concerned with fears about the “home,” whether that concept is figured as an embodied, godly state or the “traditional” mores, values, and characteristics that have helped construct modern notions of national or cultural identity.

These parallels and convergences extend to the early modern playhouse, where domestic tragedies based on true crimes were similarly cheap and accessible, and which had the added appeal of removing the need for literacy. Using scandals familiar from their representation in other media or simple word-of-mouth notoriety, plays like *Arden of Feversham* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* traded on the public appetite for stories of betrayal, violence, and murder by animating the characters and letting the audience hear their innermost thoughts and motives. Ballads were often “sung” from the perpetrator’s point of view, but the ability to “witness” the killers’ crimes, their victims’ suffering, and the aftermath and resolution of the tragedy offered an additional thrill. As with modern “non-fiction novels” like Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966), based on the 1959 murder of the Clutter family in Kansas, or film and television treatments of notorious crimes such as 1984’s *The Burning Bed*, about a Michigan woman named Francine Hughes who in 1977 set her marital bed on fire while her abusive husband slept, domestic tragedies take liberties with their subject matter to maximize the story’s impact. Given this dramatic license, playhouse portrayals of real-life crimes blurred the boundaries between interpretation and “true relation” even more than their printed source materials, with the result that audiences might well accept a

freely adapted version of the story as truth.

This conflation of fact and fiction (like today's historical novels and dramas, which often bear little resemblance to reality) was a familiar phenomenon in the playhouses, where domestic tragedies and the related genre of history plays exerted a powerful influence on the public's ideas about the past. These plays performed the related functions of teaching audiences about significant and exciting events while serving a contemporary ideological agenda, whether by memorializing their glorious shared history or cautioning against anti-social behavior. Just as household dramas expanded upon prose accounts of domestic crime, history plays embroidered their sources in order to "bring forth / So great an object" as Henry V's victory at Agincourt, or to illustrate the wages of incompetent rule with plays like Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (*Henry V*, 1.0.11-12). Ben Jonson's satirical comedy, *The Devil Is An Ass* (1616), features a conversation between a gullible Norfolk squire named Fabian Fitzdottrel and two con artists, Meercraft and Inge, who plan to fleece him. The exchange suggests that privileging theatrical interpretations over more authoritative sources signals a certain want of wit. After Fitzdottrel makes several assertions about familiar figures from English medieval history (including Richard III, of whom he remarks "you know what end he came to"), Meercraft says, "By m'faith you are cunning i' the chronicle, sir," to which Fitzdottrel replies, "No, I confess I ha't from the Play-books, / And think they're more authentic." Inge's dry response—"That's sure, Sir"—underscores how easily the foolish, provincial gentleman can be

duped (*The Devil Is An Ass* 2.4.11-15).¹⁵ This rather sour commentary on playgoers' putative lack of discernment is congruent with Jonson's well-known ambivalence about the "lowbrow" medium that brought him financial success, but it makes an interesting point about the influence of adaptation and appropriation on notions of the "truth." If the dramatic repackaging of kings, queens, and emperors could outweigh official accounts in the popular imagination, such artistic manipulations must have had far more power to shape opinions about subjects whose only other representation occurred in cheap pamphlets or broadside ballads.

Sandra Clark has written that true crime pamphlets and the plays inspired by them "were held in low esteem, regarded as trivial, time-wasting, and damaging to serious literature," a charge that continues to be leveled against less prestigious forms of entertainment from pulp fiction to reality television.¹⁶ Critical censure notwithstanding, the public's appetite for tales of domestic tragedy continued unabated, and as the eighteenth century approached, crime pamphlets and domestic tragedies were gradually replaced by the emerging literary genre of the novel, which enjoyed a similarly scurrilous reputation to the early modern materials it supplanted. This development was accompanied by a contextual shift, as the highly politicized early modern view of the home gave way to the concept of the domestic sphere as explicitly feminine. Unlike the conduct literature, sermons, and polemic analogizing the household as a commonwealth composed

¹⁵ Ben Jonson, "The Devil Is An Ass," in *The Devil Is an Ass And Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 259.

¹⁶ Sandra Clark, *Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4.

of a quasi-monarch and his subjects, “post-Enlightenment versions of the household appeared to leave the political worldview alone as they avoided the language of government that runs through seventeenth-century handbooks of marriage.”¹⁷ As Nancy Armstrong writes, “true relations” of domestic strife gave way to a fictionalized depiction of the home that “actively sought to disentangle the language of sexual relations from the language of politics and, in so doing, to introduce a new form of political power...with the rise of the domestic woman...through her dominance over all those objects and practices we associate with private life.”¹⁸ As the household became more explicitly feminized in the public imagination, its former political associations were increasingly transferred to the public sphere, which was concerned with masculine matters such as business, commerce, and government (writ large).

But early modern crime literature continued to cast a long shadow, and the disobedient, violent, and tragic figures that had filled the chapbooks and playhouse stages inflected and inspired fictional characters in the ensuing centuries. As Dolan observes:

Eighteenth-century novels are haunted by the ghosts of criminal women from an earlier era and their gruesome fates. In Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722), Moll faces the possibility of being burned at the stake for counterfeiting (a form of petty treason)...In Henry Fielding’s *Amelia* (1751), the narrator places Miss Matthews’ ‘wretched story’ of attempting to kill her seducer in a tradition of other transgressive women ranging from biblical and classical precedents like Dalila and Medea to Katherine Hayes, who was burned at the stake in 1726 for bludgeoning her husband to death...Yet, by the time these novels were written, the petty traitors and witches who haunt the heroines—grim reminders of a history of criminal

¹⁷ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 14.

¹⁸ Armstrong 3.

women *and* of how harshly they were punished—were, increasingly, ghosts from a receding past, as much as inhabitants of a contemporary social scene.¹⁹

Although it is true that “by the eighteenth century, women’s murders of their husbands and servants’ murder of their masters were rarely adjudged as petty treason,” the echoes of female criminality continued to be heard in popular fiction, where abused, transgressive, and publicly condemned women abound.²⁰ Victorian novels feature characters like Nancy, the well-meaning sex worker in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* (1839), who is a victim of circumstance, lack of moral guidance, and (ultimately) her lover’s tyranny when she is brutally murdered by Bill Sykes. In *Adam Bede* (1859), George Eliot’s Hetty Sorrel exposes her illegitimate infant after being abandoned by the dashing Arthur Donnithorne. She regrets the deed but returns for the child too late, and only escapes hanging for its murder because her seducer (who suffers no legal consequences) lobbies for a “reduced” sentence of transportation. And after years of blackmail and exploitation, the protagonist of Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) is hanged for stabbing the rapist who destroyed her life, and whose doomed bastard she buries alone, christening it “Sorrow.”

These characters—abused, constrained, impatient, intolerant or ashamed of their positions—evoke the subversive agency of the petty traitors Alice Arden and Anne Sanders, the misguided solicitude of Margaret Vincent, and the desperation of servant girls driven to destroy the evidence of their perceived wrongdoing. And

¹⁹ Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 237-238. Emphasis in original.

²⁰ Dolan 237.

like the early modern antecedents that “haunt” them, these literary descendants end on a note of feminine repentance, pious lamentation, and patient—even willing—acceptance of an ignoble fate. The men who provoke, suffer from, or bring about the female characters’ downfalls likewise conjure the memory of predatory seducers like *Arden of Faversham*’s Mosby or *A Warning for Fair Women*’s Browne; of incompetent or complacent husbands like Thomas Arden and George Sanders, who fail to control their wives or govern their households; and of feckless young men like Walter Calverley, whose irresponsible misuse of his position and disregard for those he should protect leads to violence and tyranny. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels also feature authorial interjections and instructive epigrams that call back to the exhortatory rhetoric of early modern crime literature, encouraging audiences to consider, reflect, and take a lesson from what they have read. Compare *A Pittilesse Mother*’s characterization of the infanticidal Margaret Vincent as a misguided woman “by unhappy destiny marked to mischance”²¹ with Eliot’s description of Hetty Sorrel, pondering an escape from the consequences of illicit pregnancy and thus “ready for one of those convulsive, motiveless actions by which wretched men and women leap from a temporary sorrow into a lifelong misery.”²²

This combination of pathos, sentimentousness, and voyeurism is a consistent fixture in popular depictions of domestic crime. From the late nineteenth century’s cheap “penny dreadfuls” to the contemporary “red tops,” from sleazy paperbacks featuring titles such as *Black Widow* to the sensationalist streaming

²¹ *A Pittilesse Mother* image 2.

²² George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), 340.

banners beneath television coverage of people like boyfriend killer and “sociopath” Jodi Arias (who unsuccessfully appealed to have her guilty verdict overturned because she claimed the “media circus” prevented her from receiving a fair trial), the public taste for stories of homes and relationships destroyed by violence remains strong. Writing in *Time* magazine, J.I. Baker credits the New York *Daily News* with popularizing this brand of feverish reportage in the twentieth century, and for inspiring the cinematic *noir* genre:

America’s first successful tabloid paper...dredged the depths of ’20s and ’30s culture, replacing staid journalism with lurid photos and a shocking, sleazy sensibility. In the process, it offered narratives tailor-made for the burgeoning world of pulp fiction—and the films noirs that ensued. Novelist James M. Cain’s *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, for instance, were based on the murderous machinations of Ruth Snyder, who killed her husband with the help of her lover. Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest* and David Grubb’s *The Night of the Hunter* are among other works that were “ripped from the headlines.”²³

As the century continued, the burgeoning genre of non-fiction crime literature and dramatic treatments of its subjects provided audiences with a steady stream of deplorable family violence: *Fatal Vision*, *A Murder in New Hampshire*, and *Small Sacrifices* are only a few of the televised portraits of murderous fathers, adulterous wives, and infanticidal mothers produced in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁴

The enduring appeal of stories about vipers lurking in the domestic bosom

²³ J.I. Baker, “How Tabloids Inspired Film Noir, *Time* (August 31, 2016). <https://time.com/4460487/tabloids-film-noir/>

²⁴ These made-for-TV movies were based, respectively, on Captain Jeffrey McDonald’s 1970 murder of his wife and two children at their army base home in Fort Bragg, N.C.; N.H high school teacher Pamela Smart’s 1990 conspiracy to kill her husband with help from her student/lover; and Diane Downs’ murder and attempted murder (one died; two survived) of her three children in 1983. All three were adapted from best-selling non-fiction accounts of the crimes.

indicates the deep-seated nature of this anxiety. The idea of the “home”—a concept whose very name conjures images of comfort, nurture, and warmth—as a place of danger and betrayal strikes at the heart in a way that fears about street crime do not, precisely because, according to our cultural narrative, the place we retreat to at the end of the day *should* be the safest place of all. There is also the matter of the persistent feminization of “domesticity” in the public consciousness. Ariane M. Balizet notes that “it has become commonplace for news media to use the term ‘domestic’ as a code for violence against women and children regardless of place” and that law enforcement often treats “domestic disputes” with less seriousness than it does other violent crimes.²⁵

In her 2019 memoir of surviving an abusive relationship, Carmen Maria Machado observes that “the house is not essential for domestic abuse, but hell, it helps: a private space where private dramas are enacted, as the cliché goes, behind closed doors; but also windows sealed against the sound, drawn curtains, silent phones.”²⁶ But these boundaries are frighteningly permeable and—as shown by Alice Arden’s “narrow-prying neighbors,” *A Yorkshire Tragedy*’s remonstrative

²⁵ Ariane M. Balizet, *Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama: Domestic Identity on the Renaissance Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 150.

²⁶ Machado 76. A full exploration of this topic lies outside the scope of this essay, but Machado makes some compelling observations about the characterization of abusive domestic partnerships as heteronormative, even when the violence occurs (as it did in her case) in same-sex relationships. She cites the 2018 case of Jennifer and Sarah Hart, the white lesbian couple who abused their six adopted black children before driving the entire family off a cliff. In the immediate aftermath many commentators and members of the public tried to cast Sarah (the smaller and more conventionally “feminine” of the two) as a fellow victim, rather than accept that women—and *mothers*—could be capable of such a cruel, collaborative assault. (I am indebted to Alyssa Greene for providing me an advance copy of this memoir.)

citizens, and even the diabolical forces that inspire Margaret Vincent to kill her offspring—someone is always watching and listening. Moreover, the danger may be coming from within the house, making the distinction between the (safe, known) inside and (threatening, alien) outside even more illusory. As Machado goes on to write:

I always thought the expression “safe as houses” meant that houses were safe places...but house idioms and their variants, in fact, often signify the opposite of safety and security. If something is a house of cards it is precarious, easily disrupted. If the writing is on the wall we can see the end of something long before it arrives. If we do not throw stones in glass houses, it is because the house is constructed, readily shattered. All expressions of weakness, of the inevitability of failure. “Safe as houses” is something closer to “the house always wins.” Instead of a shared structure providing shelter, it means that the person in charge is secure; everyone else should be afraid.²⁷

Despite centuries of evidence to the contrary, people continue to cling to the idea of home—of the family “house”—as the ultimate “safe space.” Balizet sees “the intersection of blood and home as a form of crisis in which domesticity represents both a refuge and profound vulnerability...a means of negotiating the shifting and often paradoxical contours of the domestic.”²⁸ She goes on to argue that the persistence of this connection in contemporary television dramas as generically diverse as *Breaking Bad* and *Switched at Birth* “suggests that domesticity is still understood in terms of the familiarity and cruelty associated with blood,” even (or perhaps especially) when “blood” is read as immutable familial connection or destiny: “Family *is* blood, and therefore the home is a bloody place.”²⁹

²⁷ Machado 78.

²⁸ Balizet 146.

²⁹ Balizet 147, 150.

But while individual homes and families are continually shown to be fragile and prone to disruption, the imaginative architecture of these ideas remains impressively durable. Even as the definition of “family” evolves to include a widening variety of models (same-sex parents, multi-racial families, blended families, foster families, shared custody, grandparents raising their offspring’s children), the concept holds firm as *the* building block of social, political, religious, and municipal rhetoric, and when violent domestic crimes trouble that belief, the news inevitably elicits prurient curiosity in equal measure to horror at the act itself. Perhaps our ongoing fascination with dysfunctional, broken homes indicates a need for *Schadenfreude*, and the comforting realization that as troubled as our own families may be, we have not reached the point where we actually take arms against or end them. Like Alice Arden’s pre-execution repentance, or *A Pittiless Mother*’s assurance that after killing her children, Margaret Vincent “so earnestly repented the deed, saying that if they were alive again not all the world should procure her to do it,” the containment and punishment of those who disrupt this fundamental institution offers reassurance that they are anomalies. *I* would never do that; *you* would never do that. Or the appeal may lie in the idea that we *might* in fact do such a thing. Perhaps in choosing to be frightened, disturbed, entertained, and ultimately comforted by the “otherness” of narratives about “love to hatred turned” we find a way to confront—if only obliquely—our most primal fears about the institutions we trust, the people we love, and our own capacity to do harm to them.

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