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## ‘[M]istris Drewry, / You do not well’: The Gossip as an Ill-Doer in *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599)

*This article compares the depiction of the gossip, the female companion, in A Warning for Fair Women (1599) with the source pamphlet and examines popular representations of gossips. I argue that the play engages with contemporary anxiety about the threat gossips were thought to pose to the patriarchal household and orderly domesticity. In A Warning, the gossip’s influence is destructive to the patriarchal household, to the community at large, and even to the natural order. The play raises the gossip’s threat, I contend, only to assuage and contain it by ensuring not only the gossip’s punishment, but also her co-operation in the restoration of the order she has disrupted.*

The anonymous<sup>1</sup> play *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599)<sup>2</sup> has received extensive critical attention focusing on, among other topics, its relationship to didactic literature,<sup>3</sup> to contemporary popular literature,<sup>4</sup> and to medieval morality plays.<sup>5</sup> Criticism has also considered the play’s engagement with concerns about social mobility<sup>6</sup> as well as with the position of women within domestic hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> Critics have explored *A Warning*’s engagement with contemporary theorization on the domestic, arguing that the disruption of the patriarchal household in this play in particular, and in domestic tragedies in general, originates either from dangers lurking within the house,<sup>8</sup> or from the world of business or the court.<sup>9</sup> Criticism, however, has largely overlooked a significant aspect of the play relating to its depiction of the domestic and threats to the domestic as contemporaries imagined them. This anxiety concerns the gossip, the female companion, represented in the play by Mistress Anne Drury.<sup>10</sup> Critical response, as Lena Cowen Orlin notes,<sup>11</sup> tends to read the plot as a parallel to other domestic tragedies, notably *Arden of Feversham* (1592), turning the mostly passive Mistress Saunders into a version of the unruly Mistress Arden.<sup>12</sup> This critical emphasis, as Orlin observes,<sup>13</sup> leads to the neglect of Mistress Drury, and, consequently, subsumes the play’s particular

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cultural project under that of *Arden*. This paper offers an original contribution to scholarship on the play by focusing on the figure of the gossip. I read Mistress Drury's portrayal in the context of contemporary anxieties about the potentially subversive role that female networks played in relation to the patriarchal household, a context Richard Helgerson describes as a 'fear of female society, the fear of what women do together [which was] endemic in Elizabethan culture'.<sup>14</sup> The play's specific cultural work, I argue, is that of evoking this threat, only to assuage it, depicting it as containable in its final movement. In so doing, the play participates in the cultural project that Orlin describes succinctly as enabling early modern playgoers to 'identify disorder and to imagine that in this way it is mastered, to participate in a communal restoration of the preferred order of domestic things'.<sup>15</sup>

Originally referring to godparents of either gender,<sup>16</sup> the term 'gossip' acquired feminine connotations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 'denot[ing] any close female friend'.<sup>17</sup> A Devon Church Court case in 1635 sheds light on the early modern connotations that the term evoked: when Agnes Hull denied being Susan Richardson's gossip, she insisted that 'she never drank in her company a long time, nor was never familiar with her'.<sup>18</sup> Spending time together, drinking, and, most relevant to the play, being 'familiar' with each other, that is, being 'close friend[s] or associate[s]',<sup>19</sup> made two women gossips in this woman's point of view. Gossiping was grounded in the female 'culture of neighbourly support',<sup>20</sup> known in the period as 'good neighbourliness', as captured in one mother's advice to her newly married daughter: 'be kind to thy neighbours ... [and] give reliefe vnto the poore'.<sup>21</sup> Women, Bernard Capp writes, 'enjoyed the company of other women, creating female spaces and times that men often found deeply troubling'.<sup>22</sup> Such 'spaces and times' included attending women giving birth, participating in christenings, and taking part in the mother's churching and the celebrations of her reintegration into the community that followed.<sup>23</sup>

Good neighbourliness, then, dictated that, contrary to the ideal constructed in conduct literature prescribing a gendered division of labour whereby the 'Good husband [belonged] without, [and the] good huswife within',<sup>24</sup> a woman had a place outside the home. A tension existed between viewing women's gossips as necessary, 'almost essential for running the household', giving practical help and advice as well as lending domestic items and money, and the anxiety that women's meetings could be subversive to their households.<sup>25</sup> The influential moralist William Gouge registers this tension in a commentary that condemns unruly wives whose disobedience, he believes, 'ariseth sometimes from the evill counsell of wicked Gossips'.<sup>26</sup> Gouge's diagnosis of the roots of unruly wives' behaviour

was hardly a novelty at the time, nor was his blaming it on unsupervised female sociability. Robert Cleaver concluded in 1595 that 'She that much frequenteth meetings of gosseps, seldome commeth better home'.<sup>27</sup> Instructively, references to 'gossips' in conduct literature, ballads, and pamphlets were frequently qualified with condemnatory adjectives, such as 'tattling', 'idle', 'rattling', and 'pratling'. Gossips are even equated with 'tale-bearing sowers of sedition'.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, many writers viewed gossips as a dangerous influence, and they responded with a mixture of fear and condemnation.

Popular literature, which often depicted unsupervised female sociability as 'schools of subversion' where older women passed on their expertise to less experienced ones, reflected and reinforced these feelings of unease.<sup>29</sup> Women's speech, as male authors imagined it, could produce a dangerous 'conversion' in a wife, a 'turn of character'.<sup>30</sup> Popular literature, mainly written and published by men and revealing more about male anxieties than it does about actual female speech,<sup>31</sup> evokes gossips as a cause of concern for the patriarchal household. In the anonymous *The Proude Wyves Pater Noster* (1560), for example, the gossips' subversive talk, taking place significantly during a recitation of the Pater Noster in the church and thus attesting to its transgressive nature, causes both social and marital disruption. The gossip's advice that her discontented friend steal from her husband's coffer to buy the latest fashion spells disruption in the social hierarchy as the wife intends to dress 'above [her] estate'.<sup>32</sup> It breeds discord in the household too: 'the good man [is] undone for ever' when he discovers, upon returning home, that his wife 'spoyled all that she myght cary / Of shorte endes and money that he had in store'.<sup>33</sup> Similar negative depictions of gossips appear in Samuel Rowlands's two pamphlets, *Tis Merry when Gossips Meet* (1602)<sup>34</sup> and *A Crew of Kind Gossips All Met to be Merry Complayning of their Husbands* (1613), whose message the title captures: a gossips' meeting is a space for women to criticize their husbands.

These anxieties fundamentally shape *A Warning for Fair Women's* depiction of its gossip, Mistress Drury. The gossip's embodiment of danger to the patriarchal household is captured in her depiction as the antithesis of the good housewife, a representation of whom figures in the play as Mistress Saunders, setting up a binary opposition between the two. In order to explore the depiction of Mistress Drury, I first examine the portrayal of the woman against whom the play pits her. Peter Stallybrass, following Bakhtin, observes that prescriptive literature constructs the ideal woman as one whose chastity was inscribed on the three spaces of the mouth, the genitals, and the threshold of her house: 'her signs are the enclosed body, the closed mouth, the locked house'.<sup>35</sup> The play portrays Mistress Saunders as just such a woman. Attesting to her closed mouth, she enters as a silent wife:

in the postprandial conversation scene 1 stages,<sup>36</sup> she is emphatically silent while Master Saunders and Master Browne (his eventual murderer) continue a conversation they presumably started over dinner. Embodying Thomas Overbury's character of the good wife who 'is more seen then [sic] heard',<sup>37</sup> she only speaks when addressed, uttering a brief 'God be with ye sir [Master Browne]'<sup>38</sup> and curtseying in preparation to leave with her husband, her utterance constituting one line out of the 320 that make up this scene. Not only does Mistress Saunders have the proverbial 'closed mouth', but others also commend her for her chastity (her enclosed body), even those who plan to violate it: Mistress Drury describes her as 'so honest, wise and virtuous' (B1v, 1.249). She is preoccupied with her role as wife and mother. In scene 2, we learn that the only reason she sits at the door is that 'my husband I attend', 'giv[ing] smal regard / Who comes, or goes' (B3r, 32–3). The play offers a visual testimony to Mistress Saunders's chastity when it shows her bluntly dismissing the sexually importunate Master Browne: 'trouble me no more' (B3v, 2.65). Mistress Saunders's dedication to her role as household mistress, moreover, is captured neatly in the metaphor she deploys to inform Master Browne that his company is undesirable. When he pretends that he only wished 'To give you thanks for your last companie [at the opening dinner]', Master Browne receives the following reply: 'such unexpected kindnesse, / is like herb John in broth ... / T'may even as wel be laid aside as usde' (B3r, 42, 44–5). The culinary metaphor, steeped in kitchen practices, marks her narrowly domestic world as well as her accurate knowledge of the characteristics of the herb she mentions.<sup>39</sup> Herb John (from the Latin *herba Johannis*) was indeed considered a 'tasteless herb of neutral qualities; hence applied, in proverbial phrases, to something inert or indifferent'.<sup>40</sup> Just as Mistress Saunders's body is enclosed, the Saunderses' house is sealed off (Stallybrass's locked house): the audience is not allowed a glimpse inside, and the closest it approaches the house is the doorstep. Underlining this aspect of the Saunderses' house, Mistress Drury warns Master Browne in scene 1: 'there you may not enter' (B2r, 1.289).

An embodiment of the period's ideal housewife, Mistress Saunders is depicted as a careful mistress of her household, a guardian of its domestic spaces. She is a version of the housewife Rowlands's Bride praises for 'hav[ing] domestique cares, / Of private businesse for the house within'.<sup>41</sup> A stage representation of such a housewife, Mistress Saunders orders her son to 'go bid your sister see / My Closet lockt when she takes out the fruite' (B2v, 2.14–5). Supervising household stuff, the government of domestic economy, was one of the mistress's most important tasks, as Natasha Korda's research has shown.<sup>42</sup> Moralists often stressed the importance of guarding domestic spaces and considered it a marker of a careful

mistress. Thomas Tusser, for example, commands mistresses to 'no doore leave unboulded'.<sup>43</sup> Mistress Saunders is also a caring and patient mother. These two aspects of housewives' duties, caring for household property and caring for children, were mirrors of each other in the period. The housewife in the anonymous 1532 translation of Xenophon's influential work on household economy, for example, assures her husband that 'me thinketh, that like wyse, as it is naturally given to a good woman, rather to be diligent aboute her owne chyldren than not to care for them, Lyke wyse it is more pleasure for an honest woman to take hede to her owne goodes, than to set noughte by them'.<sup>44</sup> Scene 2 renders this analogy visual when Mistress Saunders holds a conversation with her child, taking interest in his learning, promising him rewards 'if ye learn' (B2v, 2.9), and sending him to his sister with the instruction about locking the closet.

Mistress Saunders's embodiment of the virtue of good neighbourliness further captures her exemplary housewifery. Mistress Drury says she owns 'a soveraigne thing, / To help a sodaine surfeit presently' (A2v, 1.200–1), a reference to her skill in physic. Importantly, the only reported occasion on which she left her house was to treat a neighbour. When Master Browne complains of his (sexual) 'surfeit' to Mistress Drury (which she misunderstands at first as a literal ailment), she recalls the occasion when 'a poore woman, / ... had surfeted' and Mistress Saunders 'went her selfe, and gave her but a dramme' which 'holp her strait, in less than halfe an houre / ... And she was as well as I am now' (A2v, 1.211–18). Mistress Saunders's good neighbourliness restores the sick housewife to her domestic duties, enabling the functioning of the woman's household and the effectiveness of her housewifery. Her intervention in the woman's household is beneficial, a depiction which the play will return to in a striking visual contrast in its project to condemn Mistress Drury. Having established Mistress Saunders as the ideal housewife, the play proceeds to depict the gossip as her antithesis.

Mistress Drury enters the play as the epitome of the disorderly mistress at every turn. Departing from the source material, Arthur Golding's *A Briefe Discourse of the Late Murther of Master George Saunders, a Worshipfull Citizen of London*, which stresses that Master Browne never met Mistress Drury (they exchange letters through Roger in the source, instead),<sup>45</sup> the play opens by staging a dialogue between the two. In contrast to Mistress Saunders's one line, Mistress Drury engages Master Browne in a conversation that ends abruptly and only when Master Saunders intervenes. This conversation reveals that Mistress Drury is not under any male supervision, her unsupervised status made immediately clear with her invitation to Master Browne: 'I pray ye sir if ye come neere my house / Call, and you shal be welcome master Browne' (A3v, 1.129–30). The

possessive pronoun with which she claims the house as hers contrasts sharply with Mistress Saunders's reference in scene 2 to 'his [her husband's] door' (B3r, 40). The absence of a husband to call her away (133 lines into the play, we learn that she is a 'widow'), as well as her insistence that she be addressed by her first name ('My name is Anne Drurie', she corrects Master Browne when he addresses her as 'mistris Drurie'), inviting further familiarity, suggest to Master Saunders a need to intervene: 'Widow, come, will ye go?' (A3v, 1.131–3). After signalling the openness of her house, Mistress Drury is silenced and removed from the stage by the only patriarch present. The play signals early on Mistress Drury's need of male supervision: she is a widow. Unsurprisingly, it proceeds directly to show the disruptive consequences of Mistress Drury's conversation with Master Browne when she, upon his request, returns after the Saunderses' departure, and the subject of the talk is none other than the disruption of the couple's marriage (A4v–B2r).

That the play singles out Mistress Drury's status as a widow in its opening scene is significant. The figure of the widow, as Jennifer Panek's research has shown, had certain associations in the early modern cultural imagination. Chief among these was her alleged lustfulness and the threat she was thought to pose to social order given her 'lack of a male head'.<sup>46</sup> That Mistress Drury is mobile in contrast to the home-tied Mistress Saunders, who only leaves her house to go to her prison cell in the lead-up to her sentencing and execution, should not come as a surprise. This alleged mobility was one of the stereotypical attributes of widows that, according to Panek, contributed to early modern descriptions of them as 'willful and ungovernable'.<sup>47</sup> The widow in Thomas Deloney's *Jack of Newbury* (1597), for example, laments just this form of freedom she lost when she took a husband, railing at him: 'The day hath been when I might have gone forth when I would, and come in againe when it had pleased me without controulement: and now I must bee subject to every Jacke's checke'.<sup>48</sup> *A Warning* triggers these anxieties surrounding the widow figure with the first mention of Mistress Drury's widowhood: in addition to signalling the openness of her house (her body?) and its welcoming of the invasion of Master Browne discussed above, the play invokes this stereotype of the lusty widow when Master Browne sends Roger after his mistress once the Saunders have taken leave and left the stage. Returning with Roger at the bidding of Master Browne, Mistress Drury eagerly pardons the 'bold part' he says he 'plaid' in 'send[ing] for [her]', rendering his 'part' sexually suggestive: 'I take it for a favour master Browne, / And no offense, a man of your faire parts, / Will send for me to steede him anie way' (A4v, 174–6). The change from the singular 'part', by which Master Browne could be making a metatheatrical reference to the role he casts himself in at this point, 'plai[ng] a bold part', to the plural 'parts' is

significant. The Oxford English Dictionary's (*OED*) entry on the noun states that, in the plural, the word refers to the 'genitals'.<sup>49</sup> Mistress Drury's choice of verb, 'steed', is no less sexually suggestive. Among its various connotations listed in *OED*, steed or 'stead' means to 'minister (to necessities, desires)'.<sup>50</sup> Mistress Drury seems to be in no doubt as to the kind of help she is being sent for, and she appears to be, true to the widow stereotype, more than willing to oblige. Furthermore, soon after, Mistress Drury seems to be assuming that (correctly, it turns out) Master Browne is ailing from 'love, or secrets due to that [sex?]' (A4v, 186). The dramatic irony this scene employs, given that the audience was treated to a soliloquy by Master Browne in which he revealed the object of his desire to be Mistress Saunders, seems to make Mistress Drury, a widow eager for sex, a fool, and laughing at her might have encouraged the audience at this point to dismiss the woman as a laughing stock. At this point Mistress Drury's seriously destructive role as a *gossip* enters the play, perhaps taking the audience members who have just laughed at her foolishness aback and playing on their anxieties about gossips.

As the play progresses it emphasizes Mistress Drury's role as an agent of disorder by staging the way the gossip (mis)governs her household. Presiding over her own household, she is shown to have failed to govern it properly. Since, as Susan Amussen and David Underdown write, 'Reciprocity was at the centre of early modern conceptions of order, and the behaviour of superiors was thought to determine the character of the household',<sup>51</sup> Mistress Drury's relationship with her servant, Trusty Roger, unsurprisingly registers her failure as a mistress. Conduct literature frequently warned masters and mistresses against developing close relationships with their servants. Thomas Tusser, to cite one example, instructed the careful mistress to 'sheaw servant his labour, [and] sheaw him no more', for 'The lesse of thy counsell thy seruants do knowe / their duetie the better, suche seruantes shall showe'.<sup>52</sup> Describing the close bond that ties her with her servant, Mistress Drury defines him as her 'hearts interpreter' (B4r, 3.442), involving him in all her plans with Master Browne. Confirming this close relationship she has with Roger, she refuses to send him away as Master Browne requests upon first asking for her help, insisting that though Roger will hear their conversation, 'there's no offence' (A4v, 1.192). The play depicts Mistress Drury plotting with her servant to 'feede' on Master Browne's money (B4r, 3.51). This violation of proper household hierarchy contrasts neatly with Mistress Saunders's management of her household: a servant's (although licensed) stepping out of his place provokes the generally docile and silent Mistress Saunders into an angry outburst, and she threatens the servant to 'send my fingers to your lips' when he communicates his master's message that denies her access to money (C2v, 4.45). Mistress

Saunders explains that her fury is not the result of her husband's failure to produce the money she needs to buy domestic and personal items (in fact, fifty-seven lines later, she has already started blaming her own 'destinie' for the unlucky day, rather than her husband), but rather of the violation of household hierarchy that he has licensed. Addressing the servant, she fumes:

Tis wel that I must stand at your reversion,  
Intreat my prentise, curtesie to my man:  
And he must be purse-bearer, when I neede. (C2v, 4.57–9)

Mistress Saunders's choice of the word 'reversion' to describe the behaviour of her servant is significant; it suggests a form of inversion,<sup>53</sup> a sense of domestic order turned upside down, with the servant getting involved in his mistress's private affairs and acting as her master. The uproar that this inversion causes in the Saunders household, contrasting so sharply with the mistress's otherwise exemplary wifely behaviour, neatly underlines both the careful housewifery of Mistress Saunders and the unruly housewifery of Mistress Drury.

Emphasising her association with disorder, Mistress Drury perverts domestic and societal norms. While Mistress Saunders is depicted as a careful housewife whose world revolves around domestic chores both literally (preparing food for her family and ensuring the closet is locked) and linguistically (deploying cooking metaphors in her reluctant conversation with Master Browne), Mistress Drury is repeatedly associated with the perversion of the role of mistress. Not only does she license disorder by promoting her servant to the role of companion, but she also perverts the mistress's role as a cook or supervisor of cooking: she does not produce meals that nourish and sustain the household, like Mistress Saunders's meals do (the latter calls herself a 'cooke' in scene 2, B3v, 93). Instead, she is a *consumer* of metaphorical meals which consist of the contents of her victims' pockets: 'My sweete shalbe', she confides in her servant, 'to feede upon their treasure' (B4v, 3.51). In Mistress Drury's case, the housewife's productivity turns into destructive consumption. Furthermore, Mistress Drury's porous house epitomizes her violation of her domestic role. Unlike Mistress Saunders's enclosed house, Mistress Drury's is open to the intrusion of the outside world. Her invitation to Master Browne to call on her in the opening scene foreshadows further instances when he will share her domestic space. Planning an attempt to murder Master Saunders, Mistress Drury echoes her opening conversation with Master Browne, inviting him to 'if you prevaile, / Come to my house, Ile have a bed for you' (E2r, 7.75). Acting on her words after the failure of this attempt, Master Browne informs Roger: 'at thy mistres house weele spend the night' (E3r, 7.154). Stressing the

porousness of this house, in scene 2, Master Browne walks straight into the space imagined as the interior of Mistress Drury's house, interrupting her conversation with Roger. This house could not be any more different from the Saunderses'.

Mistress Drury's depiction as an agent of disorder extends to her perversion of the marital bond. Assenting (reluctantly and thus ensuring her reward) to help Master Browne, Mistress Drury parodies the marriage ceremony and perverts its meaning. Seeing a ring on Master Browne's finger, she indirectly asks for it: 'You weare a pretty turkesse there me thinkes / I would I had the fellow on't' (B1r, 1.238–9). She receives it with promise of further reward: 'Here Mistres Drurie this same ring is yours, / Wear't for my sake, and if ye do me good, / Command this chaine, this hand, and this heart blood', says Browne as he hands her the ring, or perhaps puts it on her finger in performance upon asking her to 'wear't' (B1v, 1.265–7). The language that Master Browne uses and his gestures — presumably, offering his hand upon mentioning 'this hand' and placing it on his heart when referring to 'this heart blood' — echo the language of marriage. The ring that passes from Master Browne to Mistress Drury visually evokes 'objects given as tokens of affection in the lead up to marriage' and the marriage ceremony itself, as described by Catherine Richardson.<sup>54</sup> This 'marriage' serves to align Mistress Drury firmly not only with the future murderer of Master Saunders, visually tying them, but also with the idea of perverted marriage. Theirs is a bond whose issue will not be a child, but rather a mutilated corpse, a disrupted marriage, and a destroyed house.

Underscoring the representation of the gossip as a threat to communities, the play repeatedly depicts Mistress Drury as specializing in the disruption of marriages — her calling. In a striking departure from the source pamphlet where Mistress Drury denies corrupting citizens' wives (C2r–C2v), the play validates the accusation as none other than Roger, who knows his mistress's affairs intimately, utters it, and Mistress Drury does not contradict him. Discussing Master Browne with Roger, Mistress Drury tests his wit, pretending not to want to help Master Browne, only to be reminded by Roger that Mistress Saunders is not 'the first by many, / That you have wonne to stoope unto the lewre, / It is your trade, your living' (B4r, 3.33–5). The play depicts Mistress Drury here as an agent of destruction of marital bonds and a 'sower of dissention', to use Crompton's words. Those patriarchs whose wives fall victim to the corrupting influence of their gossips prefigure the seduction of Master Saunders's wife, and the dissolution of his house, in turn, will prefigure similar disruptions of yet-to-be-formed households and the murder of a yet-to-be household master, as we shall see. The play thus constructs Mistress Drury as a threat to the community at large.

Mistress Drury's power over Mistress Saunders, as she sees it, lies in her status as the woman's gossip.<sup>55</sup> Contemplating her chances of success in winning her for Master Browne, Mistress Drury confides in her servant that her friend 'may be tempred easily like waxe, / Especially by one that is familiar with her' (B4r, 31–2). Mistress Drury's use of the word 'familiar' to describe the relationship is important on more than one level, and it has not received the critical attention it merits. On a basic level, it evokes Agnes Hull's definition of what made one woman a gossip to another, thus explicitly defining the nature of their relationship. More importantly, describing herself as 'familiar' with Mistress Saunders, Mistress Drury unwittingly evokes the world of witches and their evil spirits commonly known in the period as the witch's 'familiars, usually imagined as small animals such as "kitlyns", weasels, puppies, and toads'.<sup>56</sup> This reading corresponds with Tragedy's demonization of Mistress Drury in the second dumb show as an 'instrument of hell' and a 'witch' (D1r, 46, 80).<sup>57</sup> This accusation, although not directly substantiated in the play, is made palpable through the disruption not only of the Saunders' household but of the natural order itself, as we shall see, both acts for which a witch could be blamed.<sup>58</sup> Describing herself as 'familiar' with Mistress Saunders, Mistress Drury constructs herself as an evil influence on her friend and one that enables her performance of illicit acts in a way similar to familiars' enabling humans to perform illicit and socially disruptive acts.

Mistress Drury's success in manipulating Mistress Saunders is the direct result of her familiarity with her and her proximity when an opportunity offers itself. She takes advantage of witnessing a marital row over Master Saunders's enabling the inversion of the domestic hierarchy, as discussed above. She recognizes the potential in this episode, speaking in an aside: 'Good fortune, thus incenst against her husband, / I shall the better breake with her for Browne' (C2v, 4.49–50). Previous critics have closely examined this key scene in which Mistress Drury skillfully manipulates Mistress Saunders by criticizing her husband ('Your husband was too [sic] blame') and convincing her that she is destined to become a widow and take a second husband (C3r, 4.102). Mistress Drury creates 'an apparent conflict of authority', as Orlin observes, whereby Mistress Saunders is convinced that, similar to the theory of the king's two bodies, 'the body politic — that is, her husband as head and domestic authority — resides in two bodies — that is, Saunders and Browne'.<sup>59</sup> Ann C. Christensen offers a reading of this scene that rejects the condemnation of Mistress Saunders for her 'shopping list' and adopts a sympathetic view.<sup>60</sup> My contribution to this debate lies in teasing out the way the play uses goods and consumer items to associate the gossip with social, marital, and even national disruption.

The 'breach-of-credit scene' closely associates Mistress Drury with these luxury consumer items which contemporary moralists often condemned. In this scene, Master Saunders's denial of money to his wife frustrates her purchase of goods she has ordered. Exploiting this situation, Mistress Drury describes to her friend the elevated status a marriage to Master Browne would bring her in the following terms:

Now you are araide  
 After a civill manner, but the next [husband]  
 Shall keepe you in your hood, and gowne of silke,  
 And when you stirre abroad, ride in your coach,  
 And have your dozen men all in a liverie  
 To waite upon you. (C3v, 3.151–6)

This fantasy offers the immediately relevant promise of a 'dozen men all in a liverie / ... wait[ing] upon you', directly addressing Mistress Saunders's hurt pride after her one servant has challenged her authority and dangling before her the tantalizing image of, not one, but a dozen servants all queuing up to receive her orders. It also offers Mistress Saunders a promise of owning luxuries that her current husband does not seem able to afford. Mistress Drury observes that Mistress Saunders is 'Now ... araide / After a civil manner', evoking such contemporary connotations of 'civill' as 'Befitting or appropriate to a citizen' and clothing that is 'decent, seemly, respectable; not showy, sober'.<sup>61</sup> Another set of connotations not immediately available, but nevertheless relevant, is the sense of 'civil' as 'Having or demonstrating proper public or social order; well-governed; orderly'.<sup>62</sup> These shades of meaning available to the contemporary playgoer construct Mistress Saunders's appearance as suitable to her social status, respectable, and proper. Moralists insisted that the good housewife adopt exactly this kind of appearance. William Gouge, to cite one example, decides that 'A wives modestie ... requireth that her apparell be neither for costlinesse above her husbands abilitie, nor for curiousnesse unbeseeing his calling'.<sup>63</sup> A wife's apparel, for Gouge, is a visual statement of her respect for her husband, her contentment, as well as her modesty. Arousing Mistress Saunders's interest in superior kinds of clothing, Mistress Drury attacks all these connotations and meanings of the woman's appearance.

The kinds of clothing that Mistress Drury tantalizes her friend with evoke those that contemporary moralists condemned as a threat to the ordered household and to society at large. Triggered by an explosion in the consumption of consumer goods in the period,<sup>64</sup> these diatribes intensified toward the end of the century.<sup>65</sup> Concern about sartorial excess is perhaps best registered in Philip Stubbes's

*The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), which singles out Mistress Drury's two items, the 'hood and gowne of silke' (among many others), for criticism: 'on toppes of their stately turrets (I meane their goodly heads ...) stand their ... capitall ornaments, as french [sic] hood'.<sup>66</sup> 'Gownes' are also a target of condemnation. They are 'no lesse famous also, for some are of silk, some of veluet, some of grogran, some of taffetie, some of scarlet, and some of fine cloth, of ten, twentie or fortie shillings a yard'.<sup>67</sup> The most pressing issue for Stubbes seems to be the socially disruptive nature of these items: the fashion of wearing hoods has 'growen'

to such excesse [that] euery artificers wyfe (almost) wil not stick to goe in her hat of Ueluet euerye day, euery marchants wyfe, and meane Gentlewomen, in her french-hood.<sup>68</sup>

Adopting these fashions, Stubbes holds, people are no longer content to obey God, who has ordained that 'every man might be compelled to weare apparell, according to his degreé, estat, and condition of life', but violate social hierarchies and cause 'a great confusion and a general disorder'.<sup>69</sup>

In this context, Mistress Drury contributes to social disorder. This aspect of the character's portrayal receives emphasis, of course, from the fact that, as she confides in Roger, her reason for helping Master Browne is using the money she gains to 'make my daughter such a dowrie, / As I will match her better then [sic] with Browne' (B4v, 3.47–8). This detail establishes Mistress Drury as a threat to both the patriarchal household and the community at large.

Associating Mistress Drury with foreign and luxury objects and items of clothing, moreover, triggers further affiliation between the figure of the gossip and disruption of order on a national level. Stubbes, lamenting what he saw as a damaged English clothing industry, blamed imported items, stating: 'if wee would contente our selues with such kinde of attire, as our owne Countrey doeth minister vnto vs, it were much tollerable'. Far from doing that, he continues, 'we impouerish our selues in buying their trifling merchandizes, more plesant than necessarie, and inrich them, who rather laugh at vs in their sleeues'.<sup>70</sup> Nor does Stubbes's diagnosis of the crisis faced by English cloth seem to be pure paranoia. Examining the way clothing played a crucial role in the construction of an English national identity in this period, Roze Hentschell confirms that 'the wool broadcloth industry was tested by the increasing popularity of luxury textiles that were imported from the continent', adding that 'Silks and satins from Spain, France, and Italy were seen as creating a new kind of crisis for the wool industry whereby individuals across classes rejected wool in favor of luxury goods'.<sup>71</sup> Early

modern moralists, furthermore, viewed foreign clothing as morally contaminated, as Hentschell’s research reveals. The moralist writers saw the English who adopted these morally tainted fashions, Hentschell writes, as exposing themselves to items associated with ‘leisure, decadence, disease, and — most crucially — dissolution of the virtues associated with English textiles such as charity, hospitality, and humility’.<sup>72</sup> No less damning to those wearing these items was the association moralists forged between the clothes and their country of origin: ‘Papistry and lasciviousness were linked with silks and satins from Spain and Italy, venereal disease and ostentation with French fabrics’.<sup>73</sup> In a play so invested in depicting the gossip as figure of disruption of household, conventional morality, and society at large, then, the association of Mistress Drury with foreign and imported clothing items as the snares with which she sets out to corrupt Mistress Saunders does not come as a surprise.

The play is clear on Mistress Drury’s agential role in the murder of Master Saunders. She is the first character to conceive of his murder as a necessity for the success of Master Browne’s seduction of Mistress Saunders: ‘I will devise / Some stratageme to close up Sanders eies’, she decides, after her success in convincing her friend to accept Master Browne as her second husband (C4v, 4.210–11). In the second dumb show, moreover, Mistress Drury, not Master Browne, ‘thrust[s] away Chastity’ first (D1r, 33 sd), only for her action to be replicated, literally mirrored, by Mistress Saunders, who, after ‘Lust imbraceth’ her, ‘thrusteth Chastity from her’ (D1r, 811–12 sd). The dumb show visually marks Mistress Saunders’s action of rejecting chastity as derivative, imitative, and originating in her gossip’s action. The destructiveness of her intervention in her neighbour’s household removes its head and renders the previously secure house less safe. The Saunderses’ house, as discussed above, is initially enclosed — a safe haven to which Mistress Saunders withdraws from an undesirable encounter, such as when she tells the intruding Master Browne in scene 2: ‘I’le take my leave’ (B2v, 2.49). Once Mistress Saunders has been won by Mistress Drury, however, the house itself becomes suddenly less secure, less able to comfort and shelter from danger. Worrying about her husband, whose murder she knows Mistress Drury and her accomplices will attempt, Mistress Saunders asks John Beane, a messenger sent to her husband (and one who will play an important part in the play’s depiction of Mistress Drury): ‘tell me John, must thou needes home to night?’, begging for his company: ‘if it be possible, I pre thee stay / Untill my husband come’ (E2r, 6.93, 95–6). Later on, after the murder is accomplished, the Saunderses’ house and, in particular, its closet, the space that previously tropped its mistress’s authority and domestic vigilance, becomes a space of despair and sorrow. Learning that

her husband is dead, Mistress Saunders vows: 'Ile hide me in some closet of my house, / And there weepe out mine eies, or pine to death' (F3v, 10.36–7).

Given the early modern notion Ariane M. Balizet explores of the embodied house, the household as a body with the patriarch as its head,<sup>74</sup> the literal dismemberment of Master Saunders's house closely following Mistress Drury's success at 'closing [his] eies' is not surprising. Contemporaries 'link[ed] a husband's bodily integrity to his household's security'.<sup>75</sup> In Korda's discussion of material culture she writes that 'during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, relations between subjects within the home became increasingly centred around and mediated by objects'.<sup>76</sup> The play shows clearly this central role that objects played in relation to their owners' lives. The shift in the meaning of 'household' that Korda traces is particularly relevant for understanding the fate of the Saunders household after his murder. Korda observes that, in this period, 'household' acquired a new shade of meaning evident in the 'tropes of the household as a hold', a 'thing that holds something', a 'repository of goods'.<sup>77</sup> In light of Balizet's and Korda's research, the Saunders household, like its head's bleeding, mutilated body, is mutilated and starts bleeding, in the sense of being opened up and its contents leaking out, too. The dispatch of a piece of cloth and the Saunderses' plate into the outside world captures this domestic dismemberment. The origin of the piece of cloth, entirely the playwright's invention, is only revealed in the court room, where we learn that Mistress Saunders sent it with Roger to Master Browne.<sup>78</sup> This disposal of the 'cloth' marks Mistress Saunders's housewifery as negligent since she fails to safeguard domestic items. Looking after household stuff, 'the care and use of many items', as Sara D. Luttfriing writes, 'frequently fell to women'.<sup>79</sup> Though 'cloth' could refer to any 'piece of pliable woven or felted stuff, suitable for wrapping or winding round, spreading or folding over, drying, wiping, or other purpose', it could also denote a 'handkerchief' in this period,<sup>80</sup> and Master Browne does refer to it as one (F1r, 8.75). Handkerchiefs, domestic and familiar, as Korda showed in the context of discussing Desdemona's handkerchief in *Othello*, were 'the sort of household stuff that women were charged with keeping',<sup>81</sup> and its departure from the Saunderses' house marks the degeneration in its mistress's housewifery. This degeneration would have struck the early modern audience of the play in a more powerful way than it would a modern audience, since, as Dympna Callaghan's research reveals, these items were the products of female labour and industry, 'artifacts wrought by female hands'.<sup>82</sup> 'Female labor', Callaghan explains, 'produced, preserved, and accumulated over generations sheets, pillow covers, bed hangings, cushions, towels, napkins, and table cloths — the indispensable material accoutrements of everyday life'.<sup>83</sup> Mistress Saunders's negligence of her role in keeping safe

the handkerchief contrasts sharply with the female industry (perhaps her own) that produced it. In addition, if Mistress Saunders's 'cloth' is indeed presented on stage as a handkerchief, it would have been an expensive item which would function as one of those 'status objects' Korda describes,<sup>84</sup> and, as such, would have had an obvious kinship with other such objects materially present on stage in the breach-of-credit scene (purse, gloves, perfume), among which she notes the 'linnen' as being particularly appealing to her (C2r, 4.32). The cloth will serve as a powerful visual reminder of the origins of the plot to 'close [Master Saunders's] eies' hatched over the frustrated purchase of domestic and fashion items.

The cloth, moreover, registers the disruption of Mistress Saunders's domestic surveillance. Importantly, the fabric is collected *from her house* by Roger: this suggests the porousness of the house, which contrasts sharply with its initial depiction as a space where Master Browne 'may not enter' (B2r, 1.289). The cloth also links back to those luxury items Mistress Drury offered in her seduction of her friend. In this context, the blood-soaked cloth that comes back in Mistress Drury's hand in scene 10 is a visual statement condemning her as responsible for this murder and linking the murder to her seduction of Mistress Saunders, significantly, through socially subversive items of clothing. This link is visually explicit in the murder scene when Master Browne, having killed Master Saunders, proceeds to

dip my hankercher in his blood,  
 And send it as a token to my love,  
 Looke how many wounds my hand hath given him,  
 So many holes Ile make within this cloth. (F1r, 8.75–8)

The cloth, the domestic item, receiving the same number of thrusts as Master Saunders's body, becomes a material proof not only of the success of the murder, as Master Browne defines it ('bid her [Mistress Saunders] reade / Upon this bloody handkercher the thing, / As I did promise and have now performed'), but also of the violation of the Saunderses' domesticity (F1v, 8.100–3).

That this status-object ends up torn and steeped in Master Saunders's blood, its 'domestic functionality' perverted, is crucial.<sup>85</sup> This perversion links back to the perversion of household and domestic space that the play stages right after Mistress Drury succeeds in seducing Mistress Saunders. Invited by Mistress Saunders to 'Come, you shal sup with us' (C4v, 4.197), Mistress Drury comes upon a scene that stages an inverted version of the promised supper. Meals, as Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson hold, 'represent[ed] the ordered and well-governed household' as well as 'enacting and symbolising household unity and discipline'.<sup>86</sup> Inverting these connotations, the dumb show depicts a 'deadly banquet', a 'bloody

feast' in a 'fatal house' (9, 16, 14).<sup>87</sup> 'Ebon tapers are brought up from hel' and 'the ugly Screechowle and the night Raven' provide the accompanying music with their 'hideous crocking noise' (C4v–D1r, 10, 12–13). The guests (Master Saunders's murderers), described as 'divels', and, in the case of Mistress Drury, as an 'instrument of hell' and an 'accursed fiend', are welcomed by 'dreadful Furies', instead of cheerful hosts (C4v–D1v, 66, 46–7, 15). Wine is offered 'in pale mazors made of dead mens sculles' and will result not in refreshment, but 'destruction' (D1r, 21–2). The basin, moreover, filled with blood, which Tragedy brings to dip the guests' fingers in according with their guilt, perverts the ritual of washing hands during and after meals using ewers and basins 'filled with sweetly scented rose water'.<sup>88</sup> The dumb show perverts this practice by depicting an act of dipping hands in a basin that results in staining, rather than cleaning them (D1v–D2r, 69–74). The thrust of the inverted ritual is that of severing ties (the murder of Master Saunders) instead of cementing them in an act of 'reaffirmation of group identity', as the communal meal aimed to do.<sup>89</sup> This first and only depiction of Mistress Drury entering the Saunderses' house turns its rituals upside down and foreshadows the perversion of the use of the cloth as well as further forms of inversion.

Mistress Drury succeeds in subverting Mistress Saunders's housewifery in another important way. Upon the discovery of Master Saunders's murder, Mistress Drury attempts to fund Master Browne's escape, reasoning with her servant that 'we die if Browne make any stay' and sending him to Mistress Saunders to

bid her make some shift,  
 Trie al her friends to helpe at this dead lift:  
 For al the mony that she can devise,  
 And send by thee with al the haste she may.                   (G2r, 13.11–15)

Mistress Saunders answers Mistress Drury's request promptly, raising 'twentie pound' by pawning her plate ('bolles and spoones', as Roger explains [G2r, 13.5]) and sending a further 'six pound', pronouncing the sum to be 'all that she can make' (G2r–v, 13.1, 33). The importance of the acts that Mistress Saunders engages in of asking 'al friends' for help and of pawning domestic items has not been recognized in previous criticism of the play. Mistress Drury's direction to Mistress Saunders to ask her friends for help subverts one of the most important elements of good neighbourliness: helping a struggling housewife. Mistress Drury perverts an act whose original purpose is enabling a struggling house to function into one of enabling an agent of disorder to escape punishment. This act in which Mistress Saunders engages is worlds apart from her previous act of

neighbourliness: if her previous interaction with an ailing neighbour restores harmony and order to the woman's household, this interaction threatens to disrupt the community by helping a murderer evade justice. Depositing domestic items with the local pawnbroker was a widespread practice many women adopted 'to make ends meet'.<sup>90</sup> Pawning items, in other words, was the good housewife's way out of a difficult domestic situation. The perversion of this practice by Mistress Drury, its redefinition to serve the purpose of helping a murderer flee justice, neatly registers both the degeneration of Mistress Saunders's housewifery and the responsibility of Mistress Drury for the literal dissolution of the house as its items leave the domestic space and enter the market. The fact that the plate is what she pawns is crucial because of its symbolic value. Xenophon classed plates with 'iewels' and 'all suche thynges as be moste precious', recommending their storage within an 'inner priuey cha[m]bre, bicause it standeth strongest of all [and is] loke[d]' (D3v). The careful storing of the plate in a locked chamber was the mistress's duty. The plate thus evokes the 'closet' guarded in scene 2. Not only a marker of Mistress Saunders's 'considerable wealth',<sup>91</sup> the closet had a functional role as well. It was the space where the utensils and perhaps the plate itself would have been stored since closets were one of those 'personal spaces containing the householders' most valuable things'.<sup>92</sup> This evocation of the previously well-guarded closet underlines the sense of disruption engulfing the household at this point. The departure of the plate from the Saunders household also symbolizes the disintegration of the status and standing of the house in the sense of its being a family line. Wills studied by Hamling and Richardson reveal that plate was frequently left for the eldest son at the middling level, 'the connections that [such goods] made between one generation and the next [being] crucial to middling groups' sense of continuity ... [and] of their status'.<sup>93</sup> Within this context, the plate Mistress Saunders pawns stands for the disruption of family name that her transgression, instigated by Mistress Drury, has caused.

The gossip's destructiveness extends into the community at large, to future households and patriarchs, and even to nature itself. Early modern commentators saw analogies between domestic, political, and natural order, frequently arguing that the failure of good government in one of those spheres will result in disorder in the others. Violations of nature associated with violations of domesticity appear in Rowlands's *The Bride*, where the result of the withdrawal of wifely obedience is disruption of natural order 'When every Crow shall turne to be a Parret, / And every Starre out-shine the glorious Sunne' (C4v). The disruption of both nature and community resultant from Mistress Drury's disruption of the Saunders household is not surprising given the commonplace contemporary understanding of the

‘embodiment of the early modern household within the community’, to borrow Longfellow’s words.<sup>94</sup> This disruption registers in the scenes involving Old John, his maid Joanne, and John Beane, the servant attacked alongside Master Saunders and who survives to reveal the identity of the murderer. The characters appear first in scene 6, and the purpose of the theatricality of this scene is twofold. First, it establishes the bond between Joanne and John Beane (Old John, addressing John, refers to Joanne as ‘thy love’ [D4v, 6.99]). Second, it establishes the business in which Old John and his maid are involved as that of keeping order in their dwelling place: Old John explains that he aims to ‘stop a gap in my fence, and ... drive home a Cowe and a Calfe’ (D4v, 6.84). Concerned about the security of his land and cattle, Old John is constructed as a careful householder, reminiscent of Mistress Saunders in her first appearances. Just as it traces the trajectory of the disruption of Mistress Saunders’s careful housewifery through the destructive agency of Mistress Drury, the play proceeds to show the violation of both Joanne’s plans for a future household headed by John Beane and Old John’s care for his fence and cattle. Significantly, Mistress Drury’s indirect interference frustrates both plans, for the two characters will find John Beane bleeding profusely, having been stabbed by Master Browne as ‘tutr[ed]’ by Mistress Drury (B2v, 2.29).

Appearing for the second time after the murder of Master Saunders and the fatal wounding of John Beane, Old John complains about unusual occurrences he feels:

I think we are bewitched, my beasts were never wont to breake out so often: sure as death the harlotries are bespoken: but it is that heifer with the white backe that leades them al a gadding, a good luck take her. (F1v, 8.119–23)

Old John’s choice of adjective, ‘bewitched’, to describe the confusion he experiences is instructive: witchcraft, as Stuart Clark writes, is ‘an act of pure inversion’.<sup>95</sup> The sense of inverted order, of a world where domestic animals get out of control and go ‘gadding’, like human females,<sup>96</sup> is reminiscent of Rowlands’s crows turning into parrots and suggestive of natural disorder. This inversion is further evident when Old John and Joanne find John Beane bleeding. The sense of disorder invading the community is captured by the fact that Old John lets his ‘cows go where they wil’ as he and Joanne attend to Beane’s wounds (F2r, 8.153), the perverted use of items of clothing, and frustrated expectations of wedding-night sex. ‘Inversionary thinking’, as Amussen and Underdown observe, ‘loomed large in the mental world’ of early modern men and women,<sup>97</sup> and inversionary terms couch the disorder outside the Sanders’ house. Joanne’s apron and her master’s

napkin, in a similar way to the perverted use of the Saunderses' cloth, are used to 'bind up his [Beane's] wounds' (F2r, 8.153). Similarly, the anticipated sexual bearing of John Beane's weight on a future wedding night is perverted when the weight Joanne does feel is that of his fatally wounded body as both characters try to lift him up and convey him to town. Joanne expresses this sense of inversion and her frustrated expectations: 'Ah, John, little thought I to have carried thee thus within this weeke, but my hope is aslope and my joy is laide to sleepe' (F2v, 8.173–5). In these scenes, the play stresses that Mistress Drury has become a source of threat to patriarchs yet to come and to households yet to be formed. The threat she poses is grave. But the play then proceeds to contain her. It not only punishes Mistress Drury along with her accomplices, but also re-stages a private conversation between her and Mistress Saunders that visually evokes the breach-of-credit scene, reversing its effect and thus bringing Mistress Drury's unsupervised speech back under control and putting it in the service of conventional morality.

The detailed scenes depicting legal processes have attracted negative critical response.<sup>98</sup> Dolan, for instance, has commented on the 'abrupt' nature of the closing scenes of a number of domestic tragedies.<sup>99</sup> The length of these scenes in this play, however, is part of the play's cultural project, the containment of the threat to both household and community. As such, these scenes, I argue, are not as 'abrupt' as Dolan holds them to be. Instead, they carefully and neatly stage two reversals of previous scenes, their theatricality evoking and, at the same time, undoing the effects of the scenes that staged Mistress Drury's disruptive influence on her friend's housewifery and domestic vigilance. The play places Mistress Drury at the centre of its final scenes. Reworking the theatricality of the breach-of-credit scene when Mistress Drury caused her friend's 'conversion', the play stages a private conversation between the two women whose purpose is another 'conversion' of Mistress Saunders, and its agent is once again Mistress Drury. Central to this conversation between the two women, as was the case in the breach-of-credit scene, is Mistress Drury's ability with words. Earlier in the play, Roger described his mistress as having 'such a sweete tongue, as will supple a stone' (B1v, 259–60), in the context of assuring Master Browne that Mistress Drury is perfectly capable of seducing Mistress Saunders for him. This facility with words proved, as we saw, instrumental to her winning the woman over. Kirilka Stavreva, analyzing the discursive tradition of 'the sins of the tongue', has examined the way 'feminine verbal violence' was thought, in the period, to have 'the power to destabilize social hierarchies'.<sup>100</sup> '[D]ocumentary and dramatic narratives about aggressive and garrulous women', she usefully elaborates, 'often cast them as scandalous rebels against the social peace and gender norms'.<sup>101</sup> Stavreva's

interest lay in the subversiveness of women's violent speech, their 'angry words', as she puts it.<sup>102</sup> Women's words, however, whether violent or not, this play suggests, are dangerous to the social order and to established hierarchies, as Mistress Drury's success at seducing Mistress Saunders for Master Browne through conversation confirms. This cultural construction of women's words is what makes the final conversation between the two women becomes crucially important. This final scene places Mistress Drury's persuasiveness, her ability with words, in the service of conventional morality. Her goal in this private encounter with Mistress Saunders is not disruptive of household and community. Instead, her speech is restorative of order. Echoing her previous role as a 'Tutresse' of Master Browne (B2v, 2.29), Mistress Drury instructs her friend as they both await trial:

Anne Sanders, Anne,  
 ... tis time to turne the leafe,  
 And leave dissembling  
 ...  
 there's time of grace,  
 And yet we may obtaine forgiveness,  
 If we seek it at our Saviours hands. (K1v, 21.27–8, 42–5)

Significantly, Mistress Drury deploys domestic imagery to evoke Christ as 'knock[ing] for entrance', against whom, she urges her friend,

if we wilfully shut up our hearts  
 ... our soules shal live  
 In endlesse torments of unquenched fire. (K1v, 21.46–7, 49–50)

The metaphor of Christ knocking on doors is a conventional one, of course, originating in Revelation 3:20: 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me'. It gains special importance, however, in this play.

Mistress Drury's disruptive act of persuasion was grounded in metaphors of making way, of opening enclosed and locked spaces, of facilitating the entrance of someone into some previously inaccessible space. In scene 1, for example, Mistress Drury promises Master Browne: 'I wil begin / To breake the ice that you may passe the foorde' (B2r, 1.176–7), the 'ford' suggesting a body of water,<sup>103</sup> a passage that results from the broken ice. Echoing her words, Master Browne reports back on his encounter with Mistress Saunders: 'I have broke the ice, / And made an entrance to my loves pursute' (B4v, 3.71–2). Most relevant to Mistress Drury's description of Christ as knocking on Mistress Drury's door and her urging of

her friend to grant him entrance is her previous anticipation of Master Browne doing exactly that and her urging of Mistress Saunders to welcome him: ‘if he come unto your house, or so, / ... use him courteously’ (C4v, 4.186–7). The parallels between the language she uses to advance Master Browne’s suit and those she deploys to convince Mistress Saunders to embrace Christ are significant in that they not only show her own repentance, but also rework her influence on her friend into social and moral conformity. The gossip’s influence is no longer threatening in the final movement of the play, but rather recuperative of order, as Mistress Saunders’s repentance, following Mistress Drury’s speech, shows:

Your words amaze me ...  
 Even at this instant I am strangely changed,  
 And wil no longer drive repentance off. (K1v–K2r, 19.51, 55–6)

The second time around, Mistress Drury opens her friend’s door for Christ, rather than for Master Browne.

Erasing the subversive power of its gossip, the play ends with a tableau of motherly care and good household government, which reverses Mistress Drury’s influence and ensures the restoration of domestic, and by extension social, order. Moralists frequently insisted on the spiritual duties of parents, explaining that ‘if Parents and Householders shall performe no further dutie to their children and servants, then to provide for them meat, drinke, and apparrell, and to pay them their wages: then Papists, Atheists, yea, Turkes, and Infidels, doe yeeld this dutie as well as they’.<sup>104</sup> Rowlands’s *Bride* similarly teaches the wife to supervise her ‘childrens vertuous education’ (D4v). In her final moments on stage, Mistress Saunders passes on a book of devotional writings, Master Bradford’s, to her children with the instruction to ‘Sleepe not without them when you go to bed, / And rise a mornings with them in your hands’ (K3r, 21.155–6). Her final appearance is a replaying of her early scene with her onstage boy and off-stage daughter, which took place emphatically before Mistress Drury’s agency destroys her world. This tableau of motherly duties registers the restoration of proper social order.<sup>105</sup> Given the contemporary conception of the household as ‘the Parent and first beginner of Common-wealthes, the Seminary of Kingdoms, and Counsels’,<sup>106</sup> Mistress Saunders’s eagerness to ensure proper order in her household symbolizes her concern for social order. This reading finds support in Hamling and Richardson’s observation that ‘The purchase of such texts [of devotional and didactic nature] can ... be seen as a commitment to the moral and spiritual health of society’.<sup>107</sup> The play comes full circle at its close, restoring domestic and social order and eliminating

the gossip, who is now repentant, contained, executed, and finally eternally silent and severed from the dutiful housewife.

*A Warning's* concern with female networks and the anxieties about what women get up to together when not under male supervision is not unique to this play, of course. The dramatic production of the period is, as is well known, preoccupied with the issues of women's speech, alliances, and gossip networks. Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* captures exactly this preoccupation, although it works to ward off suspicion of gossips rather than reaffirm it.<sup>108</sup> Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), which includes a scene that condemns gossips as wasteful, drunkards, garrulous, and lustful, works, on the contrary, to reaffirm the anxieties surrounding gossips and their female exclusive gatherings.<sup>109</sup> What is remarkable about *A Warning's* depiction of the gossip is the way it turns the gossip criminal. This article shows how the anonymous playwright, through modifying his source material, adding and omitting elements, sharpens the gossip's role as the mastermind behind the murder of Master Saunders. In so doing, the play engages contemporary anxieties about female criminality, the subject of the first surviving domestic tragedy, *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham* (1590s). If the figure of the criminal wife, as Frances E. Dolan's research has shown,<sup>110</sup> generated considerable fear in early modern England, the criminal gossip, as *A Warning* portrays her, seems to be a worse nightmare since she has access to virtuous, industrious housewives and, in her powerful hands, they 'may be tempred easily like wax' (B4r, 31).

## Notes

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I wish to thank Professor Bernard Capp, Dr John T. Gilmore (University of Warwick), Dr Richard Rowland (University of York), Professor Ann C. Christensen (University of Houston), as well as the anonymous readers of *Early Theatre* who have all generously offered insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

- 1 For a discussion of authorship and the attribution history of the play, see the Introduction to the critical edition by Charles Dale Cannon (The Hague, 1975), 25–43.
- 2 The date on the title-page is 1599. Critics speculate, however, that the play may have been written as early as the middle of the 1580s on the grounds of internal evidence. See *ibid.*, 43–8.
- 3 Henry Hitch Adams, *English Domestic or Homiletic Tragedy 1575–1642* (New York, 1943).
- 4 Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550–1700* (Ithaca and London, 1994).
- 5 Viviana Comensoli, *‘Household Business:’ Domestic Plays of Early Modern England* (Toronto, 1996).
- 6 Mihoko Suzuki, ‘Gender, Class, and the Social Order in Late Elizabethan England’, *Theatre Journal* 44.1 (1992), 31–45, [https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/english\\_articles/4](https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/english_articles/4); Peter Berek, ‘“Follow the Money”: Sex, Murder, Print, and Domestic Tragedy’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 21 (2008), 170–88, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24322686>.
- 7 Frances E. Dolan, ‘Moral Agency and Dramatic Form in *A Warning for Fair Women*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 29.2 (1989), 201–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/450471>; Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca and London, 1994); Susan D. Amussen and David E. Underdown, *Gender, Culture and Politics in England, 1560–1640: Turning the World Upside Down* (London, 2017).
- 8 Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*.
- 9 Ann C. Christensen, *Separation Scenes: Domestic Drama in Early Modern England* (Lincoln and London, 2017); Richard Helgerson, *Adulterous Alliances: Home, State, and History in Early Modern European Drama and Painting* (Chicago and London, 2000).
- 10 The only exception to this trend is Kathleen Kaplin Smith’s recent, brief examination of the play in her *Gender, Speech, and Audience Reception in Early Modern England* (New York and London, 2017). Smith’s interest in private speech between women that leads to forms of conversion, however, means that she focuses exclusively

on the seduction episode in scene 2 of the play, neglecting how it contributes to the overall depiction of the gossip in the play as a whole.

- 11 Orlin, *Private Matters*, 108.
- 12 Ibid. The most recent example of this tendency in criticism of the play is Ann Christensen's, which, although informed and perceptive for the most part, argues that 'in each [*Arden of Feversham* and *A Warning for Fair Women*], a woman plots with her lover to cuckold and then kill her husband'. See Christensen, *Separation Scenes*, 55.
- 13 Although she draws attention to this aspect of the critical response to the play, Orlin does not explore the role of Mistress Drury at any length. Her remark simply draws attention to how different Mistress Saunders's character is from that of Mistress Alice Arden. See Orlin, *Private Matters*, 105–12.
- 14 Helgerson, *Adulterous Alliances*, 67–8; Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003); Megan Inbody, 'The Political Role of the Gossip in *Swetnam the Woman-Hater, Arraigned by Women*', in *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England*, ed. Christina Luckyj and Niamh J. O'Leary (London, 2017), 51.
- 15 Orlin, *Private Matters*, 8.
- 16 *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), s.v. 'gossip', 1a.
- 17 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 51; Susan Gushee O'Malley, 'Custom is an Idiot': *Jacobean Pamphlet Literature on Women* (Urbana and Chicago, 2004), 13.
- 18 Cited in Patricia Crawford and Sara Mendelson, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550–1720* (Oxford, 1998), 239.
- 19 OED, s.v. 'familiar', 2a.
- 20 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 27.
- 21 *Cupids Messenger* (London, 1629; STC: 6122), *Early English Books Online* (EEBO), C4r.
- 22 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 50.
- 23 Ibid., 51, 214.
- 24 Thomas Tusser, *Fiue Hundreth Points of Good Husbandry United to as Many of Good Huswifery* (London, 1573; STC: 1717:28), EEBO, Siiir. The argument about separate spheres has long been questioned. Amanda Vickery has written, for example, that our conclusions are merely 'research confidently built on the sands of prescription'. See 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal* 36.2 (1993), 385–6. See also Amanda Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England* (Rochester, 2007). What interests me here is exactly this imagined ideal against which actual practice, such as the duties associated with good neighbourliness, should be read.
- 25 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 51, 55.
- 26 William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1622; STC: 801:07), EEBO, Y8v.

- 27 Robert Cleaver, *A Godly Forme of Houshold Government* (London, 1598; STC: 5383), *EEBO*, F7r.
- 28 *Anything for a Quiet Life, or, The Married Mans Bondage to a Curst Wife* (London, 1620; STC: 698.5), *EEBO*, A1v; *Cupids Messenger*, C4r–C4v; William Burton, *The Rowring of the Sluggard in Seven Sermons* (London, 1595; STC: 4176.2), *EEBO*, L4v; Richard Bernard, *A Guide to Grand-Jury Men* (London, 1627; STC: 1943), E3v; Burton, *The Rowring*, B3r; William Crompton, *An Explication of those Principles of Christian Religion, Exprest or Implied in the Catechisme of our Church of England, Set downe in the Booke of Common Prayer* (London, 1633; STC: 6057), *EEBO*, I1v.
- 29 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 86.
- 30 Kathleen Kaplin Smith, *Gender, Speech, and Audience Reception in Early Modern England* (New York and London, 2017), 58–9.
- 31 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 367; Crawford and Mendelson, *Women*, 214.
- 32 *The Proude Wyves Pater Noster that Wolde Go Gaye, and Undyde her Husbonde and Went her Waye* (London, 1560; STC: 25938), *EEBO*, B4r.
- 33 *Ibid.*, C2v.
- 34 Sara D. Luttfiring, however, argues that the pamphlet undergoes changes over the course of its publication history that made it more appealing to female consumers and eventually ‘repositioned the pamphlet into a commodity for women’. See Luttfiring, “‘Weele pay for what we take’: Regendering Consumption in *Tis Merry When Gossips Meete*’, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 77.2 (2014), 137, <https://doi.org/10.1525/hlq.2014.77.2.133>.
- 35 Peter Stallybrass, ‘Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed’, in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. M.W. Ferguson, M. Quilligan, and N.J. Vickers (Chicago, 1986), 127.
- 36 The 1599 edition I quote throughout is not divided into scenes. I follow Charles D. Cannon’s scene divisions (The Hague, 1975) and retain the citation information of the 1599 text.
- 37 Thomas Overbury, *Sir Thomas Ouerburie His Wife* (London, 1616; STC: 18910), E3r.
- 38 I quote from the 1599 edition (London; STC: 25089), *EEBO*, A3v, 26. Further references to signature, scene, and line numbers are given parenthetically following the quotations.
- 39 In her presentation as solely concerned with her domestic role, Mistress Saunders seems to embody the virtues that contemporary prescriptive literature assigned to the good housewife. See Erica Longfellow, ‘Public, Private and the Household in Early Seventeenth-Century England’, *Journal of British Studies* 45.2 (2006), 313–34.
- 40 *OED*, s.v. ‘herb John’, 2.
- 41 Samuel Rowlands, *The Bride* (London, 1617; STC: 21365.5), *EEBO*, D4r.

- 42 Natasha Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2002), 27.
- 43 Tusser, *Fiue Hundreth*, C5r.
- 44 Xenophon, *Xenophons Treatise of Housholde* (London, 1532; STC: 26069), EEBO, Eiiir–Eiiv. Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies*, 2, notes the important influence of Xenophon's economic writings on later treatises on the household in the early modern period.
- 45 Arthur Golding, *A Briefe Discourse of the Late Murther of Master George Saunders, a Worshipfull Citizen of London* (London, 1573; STC: 11985), EEBO, Aii3r, Aiii5v.
- 46 Jennifer Panek, *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge, 2004), 2, 7; Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1998), 10.
- 47 Panek, *Widows and Suitors*, 126.
- 48 Qtd in *ibid.*, 131.
- 49 OED, s.v. 'part', 4.
- 50 *Ibid.*, v. 'stead' Id.
- 51 Amussen and Underdown, *Gender, Culture and Politics*, 60.
- 52 Tusser, *Fiue Hundredth*, E3v, B8v.
- 53 OED, s.v. 'reversion', 1.
- 54 Catherine Richardson, *Shakespeare and Material Culture* (Oxford, 2011), 3.
- 55 While Mistress Drury and Mistress Saunders are gossips, they do not present an example of female alliance, given the way Mistress Drury deceives and manipulates the initially completely unwitting Mistress Saunders. In its undermining of the patriarchal household, however, and the threat it poses to marital and social hierarchies, as this article will show, the relationship evokes such female alliances as Jessica Tvodri examines. See 'Female Alliance and the Construction of Homoeroticism in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*', in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, ed. Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (New York, 1999), 114–29. In the same volume, Simon Morgan-Russell explores what he describes as 'the destructive potential of female homosocial alliances', which seems to apply to the way *A Warning* depicts the gossips' relationship as disruptive of order. See "'No Good Thing Ever Comes Out of It": Male Expectations and Female Alliance in Dekker and Webster's *Westward Ho*', 81.
- 56 Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 175.
- 57 For a reading of the play that considers the demonization of Mistress Drury, see Mary Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage* (Cambridge, 2013), ch. 2.
- 58 Amussen and Underdown, *Gender, Culture and Politics*, 155.

- 59 Orlin, *Private Matters*, 111.
- 60 Christensen, *Separation Scenes*, 88.
- 61 *OED*, s.v. ‘civil’, 2, 4; 6c.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 63 Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, T4v.
- 64 Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500–1700* (New Haven and London, 2017), 10.
- 65 Orlin, *Private Matters*, 255–9.
- 66 Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583; STC: 23377), *EEBO*, F3r.
- 67 *Ibid.*, F6r.
- 68 *Ibid.*, F3v.
- 69 *Ibid.*, D2v.
- 70 *Ibid.*, C1v.
- 71 Roze Hentschell, *The Culture of Cloth in Early Modern England: Textual Constructions of a National Identity* (Aldershot, 2008), 6.
- 72 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 73 *Ibid.*
- 74 Ariane M. Balizet, *Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama: Domestic Identity on the Renaissance Stage* (New York, 2014), 55–60.
- 75 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 76 Korda, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies*, 8.
- 77 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 78 The way *A Warning* identifies sexual transgression with the housewife’s failure to safeguard her domestic property is similar to the anxieties surrounding the mistress’s managerial role with which *The Merry Wives of Windsor* engages. See Korda, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies*, 86.
- 79 Luttfring, ‘Weele pay’, 137; Crawford and Mendelson, *Women*, 219–20; Korda, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies*, 29.
- 80 *oed*, s.v. ‘handkerchief’, 2, 1a.
- 81 Korda, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies*, 125.
- 82 Dymrna Callaghan, ‘Looking Well to Linens: Women and Cultural Production in *Othello* and Shakespeare’s England’, in *Marxist Shakespeares*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow (London, 2001), 55–6.
- 83 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 84 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 85 *Ibid.*, 126.
- 86 Hamling and Richardson, *A Day at Home*, 98, 267.

- 87 Muriel C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1960), 18, 49, 77, traces this dumb show to the convention of the bloody banquet on the early modern stage.
- 88 Richardson, *Shakespeare and Material Culture*, 130.
- 89 *Ibid.*, 138, 142.
- 90 Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies*, 46.
- 91 Comensoli, 'Household Business', 94.
- 92 Richardson, *Shakespeare and Material Culture*, 143.
- 93 Hamling and Richardson, *A Day at Home*, 256.
- 94 Longfellow, 'Public, Private, and the Household', 332.
- 95 Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997), 13.
- 96 The term 'gadding' had particularly feminine connotations in the period: as Anu Korhonen writes, 'Gadding [was] a female way of spending time in the streets, talking to each other and showing themselves to passers-by'. See Anu Korhonen, 'To See and to Be Seen: Beauty in the Early Modern London Street', *Journal of Early Modern History* 12.3–4 (2008), 346, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006508X369910>.
- 97 Amussen and Underdown, *Gender, Culture and Politics*, 154.
- 98 Orlin, *Private Matters*, 112; Cannon, *A Warning for Fair Women*, 72, 80.
- 99 Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 26.
- 100 Kirilka Stavreva, *Words Like Daggers: Violent Female Speech in Early Modern England* (Lincoln; London, 2015) xvii. Dale, in the introduction to his critical edition of the play, describes Mistress Drury as a 'human reptile, squatting in slums and ill-famed haunts of vice, whose secret nature only emerges in the light of day to work mischief' (83). The play's representation of its gossip figure seems to suggest to Dale connections with the serpent that seduced Eve and brought about the Fall, a reading which clearly links with the biblical connotations of unruly tongues that Stavreva explores.
- 101 Stavreva, 'Words Like Daggers', xvii.
- 102 *Ibid.*, xx.
- 103 *OED*, s.v. 'ford', 2.
- 104 Heinrich Bullinger, *An Exhortation to the Ministers of Gods Woord in the Church of Christ*, trans. John Cox (London, 1575; STC: 4055.5), *EEBO*, A3r.
- 105 For the way this final tableau reinscribes Mistress Saunders within the fold of devoted mothers dying exemplary deaths, see my forthcoming article, 'Devotional Identity and the Mother's Legacy in *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599)', in *People and Piety: Devotional Writing in Print and Manuscript in Early Modern England*, ed. Robert Daniel and Elizabeth Clarke (Manchester, 2019).

- 106 Edward Topsell, *The House-Holder: or, Perfect Man* (London, 1610; 24126), *EEBO*, 5v.
- 107 Hamling and Richardson, *A Day at Home*, 19.
- 108 “‘Judicious Oeillades’”: Surveying Marital Property in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*’, in *Marxist Shakespeares*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow (London and New York, 2001), 82–103.
- 109 For a reading of the gossips’ scene within the context of early modern notions of the female body as a leaky vessel, see Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1993), 23–63.
- 110 Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 29. In *Arden of Faversham, A Woman Killed with Kindness and Other Domestic Plays*, ed. Martin Wiggins (Oxford, 2008), 8.39–41, Mosby, Mistress Arden’s lover and accomplice in the plot to murder her husband, recoils from the idea of marrying a husband-murderer once Master Arden is successfully out of the way, apostrophizing Mistress Arden in a soliloquy: ‘I may not trust you, Alice[:] / You have supplanted Arden for my sake / And will extirpen [i.e. root out] me to plant another’.

