

Emma Whipday. *Shakespeare's Domestic Tragedies: Violence in the Early Modern Home*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp 262. Hardback £75. ISBN: 978-1-108-47403-0. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108564359>.

Lucy J.S. Clarke
Jesus College, University of Oxford

Domestic tragedy has long proved a rich vein for early modernists, but the relationship between Shakespeare's scenes of household and familial violence, and the genre more broadly, has largely remained under-developed. Indeed, some critics have suggested that plays such as *Othello* and *Hamlet* cannot be considered domestic tragedies full stop.¹ Emma Whipday's book, however, ploughs a new furrow, putting Shakespeare in conversation with a rich context of popular culture and drama to offer new insights to students of both Shakespeare and domestic tragedy. *Shakespeare's Domestic Tragedies* sets out to demonstrate the close links between domestic tragedy and five of Shakespeare's plays: *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. It argues that Shakespeare utilizes the tropes of domestic tragedy and transforms the genre for his own purposes. Through her detailed exploration of how popular perceptions and anxieties surrounding the home were dramatized in domestic tragedy and Shakespeare's plays, Whipday makes an excellent case.

The book is arranged around four central 'charged conceptions' of the home — 'home', 'household', 'house', and 'neighbourhood' — which she uses as the framing for each chapter (8). Her introduction synthesizes the considerable literature on the early modern household well, although there is less attention paid to the legal status of the home than might have been warranted. Chapter one acts as a further introductory section, presenting *The Taming of the Shrew* as a sort of training-wheels domestic tragedy, where Shakespeare dramatizes the potential for violence in a disordered household. For Whipday, the play does not simply blame the disorder in the household on Kate but suggests that Petruchio's mismanagement of the household is as much a cause for concern as his wife's shrewishness. Her argument relies upon a convincing reading of the play's metatheatrical framing device, arguing that it shows how a wife might 'manage' her husband, thus 'complicat[ing] the dichotomy of authority figure and subject ... disturb[ing] the opposition in the play proper between the ruler/husband and the (rebellious) subject/wife' (42). This chapter opens up many of the central themes that recur through the book, emphasizing the problematic relationship between inside and outside the household and the dangers of disrupting domestic relationships.

This latter theme is of particular importance to chapter two, which examines domestic relationships in *Hamlet* in context with domestic tragedy's trope of adulterous murderesses. Comparing the much-repeated anecdote of a guilty wife confessing to her husband's murder while watching a play to Gertrude's failure to respond to the Mousetrap, Whipday demonstrates how Shakespeare reimagines the adulterous murderess, by 'plac[ing] in question the extent to which the remarried wife of the murdered husband is either adulterous or complicit in the murder' (96). She then persuasively shows how the otherwise inscrutable Gertrude is 'torn between two husbands who represent and rule the state' in the closet scene, arguing that the play stages the danger of submitting to a household hierarchy — to Claudius — that itself is a violation of the hierarchy of household *and* state. This chapter thus deftly shows how domestic tragedy is not simply limited to plays about non-elites.

In chapter three, Whipday turns to the threshold between household and outside world, and how the trope of doors and privacy is used in *Othello*. Once again synthesizing material from popular print and archival record, she argues that the 'Great Rebuilding' of the late sixteenth century, where the design of houses shifted towards having more private interior rooms, saw increased importance placed upon the boundary between the house and the 'common street', which had the power to turn a stranger into a guest. Whipday argues that in *Othello*'s depiction of windows and interior doors, Shakespeare completely inverts tropes of unchaste wives and daughters who wait at windows to be seen, hiding their adultery within private rooms. She persuasively shows how the play's depiction of the partially permeable boundaries of the household suggests that the danger in the household does not lie with female privacy, but with the male suspicion of that privacy which suffused early modern culture. This chapter is perhaps Whipday at her finest, consummately analyzing contemporary dramatic tropes and demonstrating their subversion.

Chapter four draws, again, upon the relationship between neighbourhood and household, arguing that *Macbeth* prefigures *The Witch of Edmonton*'s depiction of 'the relationship between witchcraft, domestic murder and household vulnerability' through its portrayal of boundary-crossing (170). Whipday shows how the breakdown of hospitality allows the pernicious influence of the witches to enter the Macbeths' home, this boundary crossing leaving the home unsafe and open to the surveillance of others. This border crossing makes the household vulnerable and leads to it becoming the site of a domestic tragedy. Whipday returns to themes in chapter two by showing how this domestic tragedy also extends beyond the home, as the violation of household boundaries leads to the fatal violation of

other households, such as the Macduffs', and threatens the security of the state. In so doing, she once again persuasively makes the case for the play as a domestic tragedy.

The afterword returns to the crucial theme of hospitality by examining homelessness in *King Lear*. It suggests that the play moves beyond Shakespeare's use of domestic tragedy to create 'a tragedy of homelessness', where tragedy is found *outside* the home (205). Whipday effectively shows how *Lear* 'offers a topsy-turvy version of the social disenfranchisement suffered by England's wandering poor', bringing the play into dialogue with contemporary concerns about vagrancy (216).

Shakespeare's Domestic Tragedies is a tremendous addition to the field. It offers powerful and original arguments for intertextuality that offer new insights into each of the Shakespeare plays discussed. Each individual chapter's argument is persuasive; Whipday moves with ease between different texts, examining ballad woodcuts, conduct literature, and drama in performance with equal deftness, drawing together disparate sources to create a cohesive and comprehensive sense of each chapter's theme. Whipday's chapters build upon one another to convey a three-dimensional image of popular perceptions surrounding the household in early modern England, identifying several recurring, linked themes: the boundaries of the household and their policing; the notion of hospitality; and the paradoxical nature of the household, where it was both open and closed, secure and vulnerable, private and public. This syncretic approach further allows her to build a rich picture of the genre, with different aspects of plays like *A Warning for Fair Women*, *Arden of Feversham*, and *A Woman Killed With Kindness* repeatedly appearing in each chapter. Indeed, Whipday's book is not simply of interest in its new take on Shakespeare. In its situating the plays in the wider sphere of both domestic tragedy and crime literature, the book is peppered with insights into the wider culture surrounding violence within the household. This is one of the delights of Whipday's approach: she offers deft, original readings of the domestic tragedies that are not simply contextual material for the analysis of Shakespeare. Chapter two, for example, offers a brilliant reading of the presentation of female accomplices in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and *A Warning for Fair Women*, arguing that both Anne Frankfort and Anne Saunders actively deny their own agency in refusing to acknowledge their own potential adulterous desires (93). In her third chapter, she offers a deft reading of the way that early modern drama mapped the household's threshold onto the architecture of the playhouse, suggesting that scenes such as the 'balcony' in *Romeo and Juliet* and Bianca's appearance at a window in *Women Beware Women* complicate the notion of a clean

boundary between within and without. While not Whipday's central focus, these steps in her analysis have much to offer a student of domestic tragedy and early modern drama more broadly.

Overall, Whipday's book presents fresh and convincing new readings that leave the reader with not simply a greater understanding of Shakespeare, but of domestic tragedy and popular crime literature. Blending detailed close reading and extensive contextualization with eminently readable prose, this is a book as useful to an undergraduate student as to a seasoned domestic tragedy specialist. There are perhaps some issues with terminological precision, where more examination of central terms might have been appropriate. Pressure on the meaning of such important terms as 'private' and 'public' might have been applied at the start of the book, and the term 'state' is frequently used without examination of what 'the state' actually connoted in early modern England, which might have added further nuance to Whipday's arguments about neighbourhood regulation. However, these are small criticisms for an extremely impressive work of scholarship that stands as a vital addition to the study of domestic tragedy, Shakespeare, and popular crime literature, and very much demonstrates the value of de-exceptionalizing one of the canon's most important figures.

Notes

- 1 For example, Catherine Richardson, *Domestic Life and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern England: The Material Life of the Household* (Manchester, 2006), 199-200.