

## *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and Domesticity, False or True: A Response to Lisa Hopkins\*

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The artistry of Thomas Heywood is not a common topic for literary analysts. Perhaps daunted by his prolific playwriting (according to his own report, he had a hand in over 200 plays) or misled by his humble professions, many have argued that his plays lack unity and care. Lisa Hopkins helps correct the record, lucidly remarking on the symbolic resonance of domestic details in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. She argues that this play deserves the same "kind of reading processes" applied to "grandier" tragedies such as *Othello* and *Hamlet* (6). Having chosen the work long regarded as Heywood's masterpiece of course aids her case; indeed, a fair amount of scholarship written during the past twenty years has made essentially the same claim for this play's artistic coherence, though citing different details and patterns.<sup>1</sup>

What remains provocative about Hopkins's argument is not her analysis of the play itself but rather her characterization of domestic tragedy, the generic category from which she wishes to rescue *A Woman Killed*. She ultimately describes domestic tragedy as "the rude, episodic, unshaped story of ordinary people, the stuff of journalistic ephemera, which was, moreover, very often centred on the domestic world and amorous passions so closely associated with women" (6). This description, Hopkins's rhetorical relationship to it, and the uneasy placement of "moreover" within it, all raise larger questions. Where did she derive this view of "traditional" domestic tragedy, how apt is it, and what are the consequences of a critical practice that repeatedly places

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\*Reference: Lisa Hopkins, "The False Domesticity of *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): 1-7.

“art” and “life” in antithesis? Why must Heywood’s domesticity be “false” for his play to be good?

Hopkins builds her case on two points presented as related: Heywood’s plot is fictional, and its domestic details are therefore chosen for their symbolic resonance. She rightly notes that, unlike the other two domestic tragedies she names (*Arden of Faversham* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*), *A Woman Killed with Kindness* does not derive from a contemporary murder case. In a year when the United States press has obsessively presented every sensationalist shred of “evidence” about the People vs. O. J. Simpson and about Susan Smith’s drowning of her children, one on my side of the Atlantic can hardly forget that “true stories” may indeed arouse the “voyeuristic attraction” and “prurience” Hopkins attributes to them (2). Whether this leads necessarily to her next claim is more debatable. Hopkins states that the factual origins of other domestic tragedies produce in all cases “something of the incoherence and shapelessness which characterise most people’s experience of life” (2); that is, facts conspire against artistic form.

Granting for a moment the formalist aesthetic presumed here, I remain skeptical about the inability of a skilled artist to craft a shapely narrative or symbolic allegory out of the facts of life—especially in an age when Biblical typology and the classical tradition of discerning *exempla* were dominant models for composition as well as “reading processes.” Two other domestic tragedies unnamed in the article—*The Witch of Edmonton* and *Two Lamentable Tragedies*—suggest that playwrights did indeed order and reshape facts to create the same kinds of artfully parallel plots that Hopkins discerns in *A Woman Killed*. Even *Arden of Faversham*’s shifty tone and construction may not be a sign of incoherence caused by adherence to facts (with which it tampered).<sup>2</sup> Rather, it may indicate a conflicted attitude toward the story itself: a fitful recognition of the complexities involved in assigning moral responsibility, complexities that defy conventional wisdom. Whereas Hopkins sees kinship to the Theatre of the Absurd, I might instead glance back to the differently structured but equally discomfiting *Medea* of Euripides.

The premise that the residue of life creates random, meaningless effluvia in art leads Hopkins to conclude that fact-based domestic tragedy is less literary. Indeed, the presence of details drawn from actual lives

becomes for her the essence of "traditional domestic tragedy," making it synonymous with docudrama. Is this a received opinion, a straw man argument designed to free *A Woman Killed* from ignominy, or a new definition of the genre? The question is a sincere one. In my own study, I have found descriptive variety and murkiness in the definitions of domestic tragedy, a term coined only in the nineteenth century (by the notorious scholar/forgery, John Payne Collier). The early moderns did not use this generic label—much less differentiate between innovative and "traditional" domestic tragedies; all the plays we so describe were new to them, a type of contemporary drama developing only with the emergence of the public theatre repertory in the latter part of the sixteenth century. How we treat as well as define these plays has broader consequences, which bear upon those modern reading processes Hopkins's essay (guardedly) seems to endorse.

I return to the definition quoted in my second paragraph, which Hopkins presents as a "traditional difference in classification" between domestic and classical tragedy. In the nineteenth century, domestic tragedy was indeed differentiated from the classical form, but not always with such dismissiveness as is implied here; indeed, the category was meant to distinguish the stories of non-royal, contemporary figures as worthy objects for serious attention. The obvious kinship between the protagonists of such plays and those in nineteenth-century novels helps explain repeated critical reference to Heywood's Master Frankford as "bourgeois," although he is a wealthy, landed gentleman. Domestic themes were so much the stuff of late nineteenth-century theatre that even subtler generic distinctions were made, my personal favorite being the "nautico-domestic drama." Most assuredly associated with the feminine "sphere" of home life, domestic tragedy was subordinate to the classical but still far more than "journalistic ephemera" for its earliest students.

H. H. Adams's standard scholarly work on *Domestic, or Homiletic Tragedy* (1943) announces its inheritance of a moralizing tradition, and also counters Hopkins's emphasis on these stories as primarily voyeuristic or prurient in appeal. Quite the converse: Adams argues that such plays were primarily meant to teach lessons, hence their less textured and subtle presentation. Like the Reverend Henry Goodcole,

who transcribed for publication so many stories of murderers and witches during the early seventeenth century, Adams discerned a pious purpose for the immediate, detailed representation of errant Englishmen and women. My desire is not to argue the relative merits of these positions in describing actual audience responses, but to note how they serve the scholars' differing aims; Adams's definition attempted to elevate the genre itself, whereas Hopkins's definition serves her goal of redeeming a particular work from the seamy genre.

Or so it seems to this reader. Some of Hopkins's qualifiers and phrasings give me pause: most notably, that "moreover" adding domesticity and amorous women to the rude world of ephemera. This would seem to be an apt description of common sixteenth-century associations, not the author's own. Her repeated references to "traditional" ways of viewing drama leave me wondering whether she wants to distinguish them from her own stance. Hopkins never takes issue with those traditions though she seems rhetorically removed, perhaps not fully endorsing the aesthetic hierarchy of universal over particular, literary over lived, timeless over transitory, classical over domestic—the binaries which sustain her argument. If so, the placement of women—both in this hierarchical list and in *A Woman Killed*—would reasonably account for a little distancing.

My comments could easily turn in a direction familiar to those in women's studies. I will not now rehearse the truth and consequences of the aesthetic grids above, how they have sometimes legitimized forms of social subordination when a choice between putative "opposites" is demanded; such work has been done elsewhere, from de Beauvoir and Cixous to Showalter, Schor, Moi, and more. Nor need I detail (post)modernity's love affair with the detail, arguing for an alternative aesthetic valuing of *bricolage*, *verfremdung*, or the supplement. Rather than invert the hierarchical list, I simply want to point to its enduring power—here, there, and everywhere. The effect in Hopkins's article is to disjoin art and life, and specifically the life associated with domesticity. Another rhetorical approach is possible, achieving the same goal of honoring *A Woman Killed* without denigrating domestic tragedy in order to do so. For just as "amorous passions so closely associated with women" appear in the classical and Shakespearean tragedies "tradition-

ally interpreted as dealing with concerns universally applicable," so can domestic tragedy as a genre be as porous as the topics it contains (6). It can be artful or ill done, its details from life given symbolic weight or simply inserted like the designer labels in a 1980s New York novel. We need not kill domestic tragedy with its own kindness.

Hopkins's examples point the way to a fuller exploration of the local details, whether derived from an actual case or not. She mentions the setting of York Castle in the subplot of *A Woman Killed* as possibly connoting Catholicism, the "Old Religion"; one might add that the initial hunting party gone awry occurs at Chevy Chase, another reminder of past battles and an older world of honor superseded. But if the North can be symbolic in this fiction, might it carry similar associations in fact-based plays such as *A Yorkshire Tragedy* or *The Late Lancashire Witches*? Knowledge of the town of Faversham's financial involvement with the Cinques Ports reinforces the connection between the defense of a nation and a household in *Arden of Faversham*; when Thomas Arden is displaced from his chair and then murdered, more is at stake than one man's fall. And in one of the most ironic of domestic plays, *The Witch of Edmonton*, the conventional associations with place are both asserted and undone: Old Carter, the jovial embodiment of a mythic past when sturdy English yeomen upheld family values, mistakenly assumes that a London gallant will be more dangerous to his daughter than is local boy Frank Thornton. In all these cases, the specifics of locale do matter.

Such examples lead us to look back and forth between history and drama—not to seek simple equations or facile anecdotes, but to explore a fruitful interaction. Instead of locking the door on life, we might wish to consider a wider set of reading processes even as we honor the gentle craft of playwriting. When reading the memorable soliloquy of Master Frankford with which Hopkins initiates her discussion, Lena Cowen Orlin and I likewise see the power of detail and physicality, but it leads each of us in a different direction: Hopkins to images of penetration, myself to a narrative pattern mixing secular and sacred versions of the Fall, and Orlin to the innovation of locked chambers and new notions of privacy and gendered space. A similar wealth of possibilities waits to be examined in other plays dubbed domestic tragedy—if assumptions about the genre and the topics they contain do not prevent us from

crediting their aesthetic potential. In the process of exploration, we may also discover that those associations with women and the world of domestic culture, once regarded as trivializing, hold more interest than traditional aesthetics may have perceived. Four centuries later, the "ephemera" provides a rare glimpse of something like history.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hopkins cites only Brian Scobie's 1985 edition and two studies of Heywood written prior to 1970. For a small sampling of more recent approaches, see the articles by Laura Bromley ("Domestic Conduct in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*") and myself ("Many Mansions: Reconstructing *A Woman Killed with Kindness*") in *SEL* 26 (1986): 259-76 and 277-94 respectively; Nancy A. Gutierrez's "The Irresolution of Melodrama: The Meaning of Adultery in *A Woman Killed With Kindness*," *Exemplaria* 1 (1989): 265-91; and Lena Cowen Orlin's thorough discussion in *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994). Some of these studies further substantiate Hopkins's suggestions about Heywood's symbolic use of detail, though they challenge the definition of domestic tragedy that she presumes.

<sup>2</sup>See Orlin on the historical facts about Thomas Arden, who was not a longtime country gentleman of Kent but a "new man" owing his fortunes to the crown and court, and thus far from a stable icon of social authority; both Orlin and Frances Dolan (*Dangerous Familiars* [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994]) discuss the emphasis on Alice Arde[r]n's "petty treason" in narratives about his murder.