

## More on Reading “Domestic” Tragedy and *A Woman Killed with Kindness*: Another Response to Lisa Hopkins\*

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In response to Lisa Hopkins’s article “The False Domesticity of *A Woman Killed with Kindness*” I want to make one, brief, point: the catch-all category of the domestic is ‘false’—or problematic—in a way additional to, though not contradicting, the one located in her article. It is a word which describes institutions and systems of thought which were in conflict in the seventeenth-century. ‘Domestic’ is a term at the lexical intersection of complementary meanings which are also potentially contradictory: home, household, service, possession, native, of the nation, making homely (domestication). Moreover, to an extent, the understanding of plays within the critical term ‘domestic tragedy’—a term which seems to stem from nineteenth-century literary critical discourse—has tended to obscure the ways in which ‘domestic’s’ connotations—‘home’, ‘household’, ‘possession’—are in conflict as well as in harmony.

In the late seventeenth-century Ann Bradstreet wrote:

When by the ruins oft I past  
My sorrowing eyes aside did cast.  
And here and there the places spy  
Where oft I sat and long did lie:  
Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,  
There lay that store I counted best.  
My pleasant things in ashes lie,  
And them behold no more shall I.<sup>1</sup>

Bradstreet’s lament proposes as lost both household items and the domestic scene: items of value, store and order in the household—

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

“trunk,” “chest,” “store I counted best”—are valued in loss as they were experienced “oft I sat and long did lie.” The loss is of the economically productive and the affective kinds, a combination which speaks to us of a lost economic and affective situation—not only of “house” but of “home.” In Bradstreet’s poem, then, the economic emphasis of household sits in harmony with the affective emphasis. I would suggest that the poem’s linking of objects and relations produces a lost harmonious ‘domestic’ situation in a way that we do not find in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, where ‘household’ and desired ‘domestic’ privacy are set in opposition.

Lute, house, land, hunting, Yorkshire are thematised, even partly allegorised. Yet Frankford’s description of felicity “in a study” contrasts with Bradstreet’s understanding of the interior space of the house in a way that exceeds obvious generic difference:

FRANKFORD

How happy am I amongst other men  
 That in my mean estate embrace content.  
 I am a gentleman, and by my birth  
 Companion with a king; a king’s no more.  
 I am possessed of many fair revenues,  
 Sufficient to maintain a gentleman.  
 Touching my mind, I am studied in all arts;  
 The riches of my thought and of my time  
 Have been a good proficient. But the chief  
 Of all the sweet felicities of earth,  
 I have a fair, a chaste, and loving wife,  
 . . . (IV. 1-11)<sup>2</sup>

We have already been alerted to the fact that all is not well, that ironic knowledge is part of the scene. Frankford takes ill-founded contentment in the way in which his life, he thinks, brings his “revenues,” study and status as gentleman into a productive harmony implicitly likely to increase both his wealth and status.

In *A Woman Killed*, ironically, it is precisely the intimate activities which take place in domestic spaces—secrets from the open economy of the household—which threaten this financially and socially productive economy. It seems to make sense, then, to begin to think of the ‘domestic’ as a category sometimes in competition with the other categories which

are often taken as equivalents—house, household—and even as potentially associated with that apparently alien additional meaning, ‘pertaining to the nation.’<sup>3</sup>

The explicit connotation of Bradstreet’s poem, that of a desired (and lost) ability to remove herself into an achieved privatised *domestic* space —“Where oft I sat and long did lie”—is not a category to be taken for granted (as Hopkins rightly argues) but one which is in question in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and which, notably, fails to be achieved in the marriages presented in the two plots. Indeed, the narrative of the play could be described as the articulation of the possibility of the ‘domestic’ in the marriage of Ann and Frankford superseded by the reassertion of other *household* connections, particularly that of ‘service’ between servant and master.

In the scene in which the adultery is discovered Frankford and his servant Nick return to the house together, Nick providing a commentary, first for his master then for us. Nick hands him the key:

FRANKFORD

. . . now to my gate.

NICK

It must ope with far less noise than Cripplegate, or your plot’s dashed.

FRANKFORD

So, reach me my dark lantern to the rest.

Tread softly, softly.

NICK

I will walk on eggs this pace. (XIII.17-22)

The union of master and servant in exposing Mistress Anne’s adultery is a key moment in the emerging triumph of household over a desired domestic union. This is further complicated, though, by the different attitudes suggested in Frankford’s allegorisation of props such as the key, suggesting the relationship between guilty secret and the divine law and Nick’s proverbial and ironic comments. That a key scene in the play offers us two viewpoints of the meaning of female adultery, one emphasising intimacy and the divine, the other the colloquial, yet suggesting identification (“and the case were mine” (XIII,37)) suggests that even as it is happening the play is ambivalent, and invites the audience to ambivalence, about the competing claims of intimate

domesticity and the homosocially controlled household. These two ways of thinking about social arrangements are part of the constellation of ways of understanding female adultery, marriage and the household presented in the rest of the play. Arguably, the play's movingness and affective potential in production comes from the irreconcilability of the networks of meaning around contradictory understandings of marriage as—to put it schematically—affective/intimate/domestic versus economic/public/household.

I am suggesting, then, that one of the cultural struggles articulated in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* is around the question of 'household' and the 'domestic' as representing economic systems and affective demands not easily reconciled. It repeatedly signals the gaps and contradictions amongst these ideas (and ideals) and uses them to establish poignancy in the contradictions which cannot be resolved. The 'key' texts of the current canon of 'domestic tragedy'—*A Woman Killed with Kindness*, *Arden of Feversham*, and others—can be understood as activating an audience's confusions and desires about the place of the *household* in relation to other categories which compete for psychic and affective space without ever replacing the economic base that made households productive as well as consuming and affective units. Certainly, fantasies and problematic ideals about the private 'domestic' space of the couple at 'home' can be seen to be in conflict with a potentially rival value system to the ideal of the household as economically productive in both *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and Heywood's later rewriting of it, *The English Traveller*.

A second question about the 'domestic' is its critical use. Sometimes, as Lisa Hopkins suggests, critical use of the term 'domestic tragedy' indicates an unexamined and problematic distinction between 'high' and 'popular', with a few critics even using the label 'domestic tragedy' to justify reading the texts as unmediated evidence of early modern 'life', simply offering, as F. S. Boas saw it, 'evidence' about "Elizabethan times."<sup>4</sup> Such conceptualisation of these plays as offering 'evidence' is marked by its origins; the literary-critical category of 'domestic drama' and 'domestic tragedy' seems to have taken hold, if not come into being, at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. It shares discursive and ideological space not with the ideologies of early modern

England, but with the Angel in the House. As well as the plays' use as evidence we find also a set of assumptions about the domestic coming into being as the sub-canon of domestic drama comes to be formed.

As a retrospective genre, 'domestic tragedy' usefully designates a group of plays. But perhaps such genericisation and canon-production has to some extent obscured links—which Hopkins points out—to plays often considered very different. Indeed, until very recently the genre of domestic tragedy reaped the dubious benefit of a philological obsession with categorisation and essentialisation following on from the taxonomising scholarship of critics such as Boas and Schelling. This sometimes leads to a rather circular location of the domestic in domestic tragedy. Critics Ada and Herbert Carson mused, "both *Arden of Faversham* and *Death of a Salesman* are domestic tragedies. Their essence is the same. What is that essence?"<sup>5</sup> The essence they locate—revealed again and again by critics of domestic tragedy—is that the plays are "realistic" and "didactic" and—"domestic" (13). A recent critic, Andrew Clark, recognises this but nevertheless writes of "a group of tragedies . . . which are manifestly different from those dealing with persons of high estate. . . . an obvious departure from the humanist, classical, conception of drama . . . . The playwrights may seldom employ the designation 'domestic'—certainly it did not pass into common usage with Elizabethan dramatic critics—but they seem to be under no illusion as what they were attempting."<sup>6</sup>

The assumption that the 'domestic' is synonymous or in harmony with associated terms is accompanied by critical disavowal of its link to the nation and issues which might exceed the imaginedly private bounds of the domestic unit or household (though, of course, the assumption that 'private' life begins at the door of the house is repeatedly questioned in these plays where—as in *A Woman Killed*—the law is in a very intimate relation to domestic desires). The 'domestic' is assumed to be remote from the national-political; in 1908 Felix E. Schelling offers two categories, "The National Historical Drama" is followed by "Domestic Drama."<sup>7</sup> This enduring division instantiates a split in understandings much more modern than early modern in its sense of the relation between private and public spheres.

In sum, there is another 'false domestic' in domestic tragedy; the retroactive hiving off of the sphere of 'the domestic' in the critics of the turn of the century. We can return to the plays with a more problematic sense of the domestic as articulating fantasies and desires about early modern social being rather than, as Hopkins rightly notes, reading the plays as evidence of 'the domestic.' And the 'domestic' and associated desires and ideals can, I am arguing, be better understood as signifying a competing system of ideals and desires not a self-evident or an evidentiary category.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ann Bradstreet, "Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House July 10th, 1666."

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Heywood, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, ed. Brian Scobie (London: A&C Black, 1985). Subsequent references in text.

<sup>3</sup>I am grateful to I. Leimberg for suggesting that I pursue this route.

<sup>4</sup>F. S. Boas, *Thomas Heywood* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1950) 45.

<sup>5</sup>Ada Lou Carson and Herbert L. Carson, *Domestic Tragedy in English: Brief Survey*, 2 vols. (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1982) 1:3.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Clark, *Domestic Drama: A Survey of the Origin of the Antecedents and Nature of the Domestic Play in England 1500-1640* (Salzburg: Institut für englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1975) 3.

<sup>7</sup>Felix E. Schelling, *Elizabethan Drama 1558-1642* (London: Archibald Constable, 1908) 310.