

## INTRODUCTION

*Shakespeare's Domestic Tragedies*

On 23 August 1594, a young man named Thomas Merry invited his neighbour, Master Beech, into the upper room of his home, and murdered him by hitting him over the head with a hammer. Merry dismembered the corpse and hid the pieces across London, before forcing his sister, Rachel, to help him conceal his crime by cleaning up the blood. The murder was reported in news pamphlets, and in broadside ballads, which ventriloquised the voice of the deceased victim ('Beche His Ghost') and that of Rachel, who was executed with her brother for the crime ('The Pitifull Lamentacon of Rachell Merrye').<sup>1</sup> Six years later, Henslowe's *Diary* records that 'The Tragedy of Thomas Merry' was staged at the Rose, in the same Southwark neighbourhood where the crime took place.<sup>2</sup>

The following year (1601), a play named *Two Lamentable Tragedies*, attributed to a scribe named Robert Yarrington, was printed.<sup>3</sup> *Two Lamentable Tragedies* is unusual in representing two interlocking narratives: one set in Padua in the non-specific past, concerning the murder of a ward by his uncle, and the other a true crime set in contemporary London – the tragedy of Thomas Merry. The relationship between Henslowe's record and the surviving play-text has been much debated, but whether Yarrington's 'Merry' narrative is some form of memorial reconstruction of Henslowe's play, or a separate play altogether, it would seem that both are based on Merry's crime, and are testimony to the popular attention that the murder attracted.

*Two Lamentable Tragedies* emphasises the ways in which Merry's home, in its spatial organisation, household hierarchy, and neighbourhood location, is involved in both his crime and its discovery: the extent to which Merry believes that he is private, and thus invulnerable, in the exclusive space of the upper room of his home; the forced complicity of the subordinate members of Merry's household, as cleaning up the traces of the crime becomes subsumed into domestic routines; and the role played in the detection of the crime by the surveillance and interference of Merry

and Beech's neighbours. It focuses upon the true and recent nature of the crime portrayed, and the quotidian and recognisable world in which the crime takes place. As such, it belongs to the genre usually termed 'domestic tragedy', which comprises a group of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays that portray disruption, transgression, and death in non-elite English households.

Five years or so after this play was printed, Shakespeare wrote a play in which a householder betrays the bonds of hospitality by murdering a guest in a private and exclusive space within his home. The householder's wife hides the murder weapons and assists the householder in cleaning up the victim's blood. However, members of the surrounding community soon come knocking at his gates to discover the murdered body. *Macbeth* was based on a narrative in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, published in a large and expensive book far removed from the street literature that provided the source material for *Two Lamentable Tragedies*.<sup>4</sup> Yet Holinshed's *Chronicles* also contains the narrative of the Elizabethan crime on which the earliest surviving domestic tragedy is based: the murder of Kentish landowner Master Arden by his wife and various accomplices, which forms the subject of *Arden of Faversham* (1592). Thus a single text became a source for numerous history plays, including those of Shakespeare, as well as for a popular domestic tragedy.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, *Macbeth* may have been influenced by, or at least share source material with, a broadside ballad: it is usually assumed that Macbeth's bloody downfall is the subject of *The Ballad of Macdobeth*, now lost, which was entered in the *Stationers' Register* in 1596.<sup>6</sup>

Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy of familial ambition, kingship, and witchcraft, then, shares some surprising correspondences with a domestic tragedy based on the recent murder of a shopkeeper in Southwark. The plays use similar narrative devices, spatial configurations, and dramaturgical tropes, as I will discuss further in Chapter 4, and exhibit connections to Elizabethan 'cheap print' in the form of the broadside ballads that share their subject matter.<sup>7</sup> The relationship between these two plays is not an isolated example of correspondences between a Shakespearean tragedy and a domestic tragedy. Rather, as this book will demonstrate, the shared preoccupations of the two plays – the relationship between the ideal home and its inverse; the extent to which household bonds can become criminal (or fatal); the ways in which charged domestic spaces can shape behaviour; and the impact upon the home of the surveillance, interference, and influences of the outside world – are common to many of Shakespeare's plays, as well as to domestic tragedies.

Introduction

3

This book offers a significant reappraisal of the relationship between *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and the genre of domestic tragedy. It suggests that the plays usually classed as domestic tragedies – *Arden of Faversham* (1592); *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599); *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601); Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607); *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608); Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1623); and Heywood's *The English Traveller* (1630) – interact with Shakespeare's tragedies in significant and previously unconsidered ways, and that the portrayal of domestic violence in *The Taming of the Shrew* is a suggestive precursor to this interaction. It does not so much place these plays in a conversation with one another, as demonstrate that such a conversation is already taking place.

This book situates Shakespeare's engagement with the formal tropes and thematic concerns of domestic tragedy within the wider context of constructions of the home (and violence within it) in early modern English culture. The historicism I offer juxtaposes literary writings with comparatively marginalised texts, such as broadside ballads and news pamphlets – what Sandra Clark defines as 'street literature', and Tessa Watt terms 'cheap print' – in an attempt to revise literary and cultural history 'from below'.<sup>8</sup> I close read accounts of domestic violence in street literature, in order both to illuminate the portrayals of disrupted homes in domestic tragedy and Shakespeare's tragedies, and to trace ideas of home (and its vulnerabilities) across what could be described as early modern popular culture.

The term 'popular culture' is often used as shorthand for the culture of the non-elite.<sup>9</sup> However, in early modern England many texts that could be read as pertaining to the culture of the non-elite also attracted an elite audience, from plays performed both at the playhouse and at court to the homilies and sermons that both sets of people heard on Sundays, sometimes within the same congregation.<sup>10</sup> Elite readers might hear a ballad sung in a marketplace or tavern; as Patricia Fumerton argues, what 'viewers or listeners of ballads saw or heard' depended 'on just where they happened to be walking or standing – the bookstall, the market place, the alehouse, the scaffold'.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, as Christopher Marsh observes, ballad-singers could be 'permitted to perform at the mansions of the mighty', and ballads were occasionally addressed specifically to the gentry, which 'was to some degree an affectation, designed to flatter the humble, but it also had a more direct and literal purpose, for gentlemen did buy and sing ballads'.<sup>12</sup> This book suggests that Shakespeare's plays and domestic tragedies are in conversation with early modern popular culture more broadly, in constructing

and explicating the home and its tragedies; in so doing, it is alert to the material and social provenance, and implied and constructed audiences, of these texts.

In staging the violent homes of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, Shakespeare engaged with popular conceptions of tragic domesticity from cheap print, and at once appropriated and transformed the genre of domestic tragedy. Shakespeare created new versions of domestic tragedy in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, using heightened language, foreign settings, and elite spheres to stage familiar domestic worlds. This introduction explores the interlocking and often contradictory ways of conceptualising the home in print culture; charts the significance of the home for the early modern English state; defines the genre of domestic tragedy in relation to how these plays construct and contest their own genre; and traces the history of reading Shakespearean tragedies as domestic. In so doing, it demonstrates why an exploration of the affinities between Shakespeare's tragedies and domestic tragedy is both necessary and significant.

### Conceptualising the Home in Early Modern England

The first and chiefe use of an house is to defend man from the extremity of winde, and weather. And by the receipt of comfortable light and wholesome ayre into the same, to preserve man's body in health. Therefore, whosoever taketh from man so great a commodity as that which preserveth man's health in his castle, or house, doth in a manner as great wrong as if he deseised him altogether [put him out of possession] of his freehold ... If one who hath a horrible sicknesse be in my house, and will not depart, an action will lye against him, and yet he taketh not any aire from me, but infecteth that which I hath ... And though light and air be common, yet if by any man's own act they may be made private, they may not be taken from him.<sup>13</sup>

In the early 1580s, Master Hales of London sued his neighbour, 'J. S.', for building a house that blocked his light and reduced his portion of 'wholesome air'. The case was considered significant enough to be brought to public notice over fifty years later, and the result was the publication of a tract that set forth the arguments of 'foure famous Sages, of the common law' concerning Hales' complaint (p. 1). The publication of the pamphlet attests to the continuing public interest throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in the rights and responsibilities of a property-holder, and the extent to which these rights and responsibilities may be contested.

The point of disagreement was whether Hales had the right to restrict the building of another's house in order to safeguard the comforts of his own home. Master Monson, one of the aforementioned 'sages', defends Hales' position, suggesting that the 'use' of a house is at once to protect its owner from the malignant forces outside, and to ensure that all beneficial elements are able to enter; the boundaries of the home must be selectively permeable. If the building undertaken by J. S. diminishes the use of Hales' house, through either allowing the entry of what is malignant (such as, in Monson's illustration, a person with a contagious illness) or obstructing the entry of what is beneficial (in this case, light and air), then the construction of J. S.'s property damages the property of another, and so becomes illegal. Another 'sage', Master Wray, shares this position, arguing that if the construction of a house 'hurts' the freehold of another, then it is a 'nuisance' according to common law (p. 11). Wray goes further than Monson, arguing that light and air are not merely beneficial but 'necessary' to a house; should they be 'taken' from the householder, his house 'remaineth as a dungeon' (p. 11).

Both Monson and Wray draw upon the claims of Francis Bacon in his essay 'Of Building'. Bacon suggests that anyone who 'builds a faire house upon an ill seat committeth himself to prison'. Bacon's definition of an ill seat incorporates 'unwholesome' air, but it is not confined to natural causes; he also considers an ill seat to be one adjoined by 'ill neighbours'.<sup>14</sup> Yet his primary emphasis is upon the role of the house in preserving health, and the dangerous consequences of allowing 'unwholesome' air within a home. This preoccupation is drawn from medical discourses of the period. In 1550, Andrew Boorde expressed similar concerns: 'For yf the ayer be fryshe pure and clene a bouthe the mansion or howse, it doth conserve the lyfe of man ... And contraryly evyll and corrupt ayers doth infecte the bloode ... and therefore it doth breede many diseases and infirmities through the whiche mannes lyfe is abbrevyated and shortenyd.'<sup>15</sup> Thus a house with clean air can prolong life, and an 'unwholesome' home can shorten it. Building or renting a house without due consideration of its health-giving properties can prove fatal.

Yet whilst the role of the home in preserving health was a prevailing concern, not all commentators agreed that householders were automatically entitled to such health-giving properties. When Master Manwood, another lawyer, defends the position of J. S., he uses this definition of an ill seat to condemn Hales' actions: he considers light and air to 'be not things of necessity but of pleasure', and he argues that the air is 'not any element local' (p. 19). Thus for Manwood, Hales may own his property, but he does not

own the light and air that may enter it; nor do light and air constitute the 'use' of a house. Yet Manwood's argument rests upon the same assumptions as those of Monson and Wray: that the ownership of property entitles a man to certain benefits pertaining to that property. For Manwood, these benefits are neither light nor air, but privacy. Thus he complains: 'And if you make your windows into our garden, this is a wrong done unto us, for by this means I cannot talk with my friends in my garden but your servant may see what I do, and so the wrong first began in Master Hales' (pp. 21–22). For Manwood, as for the other sages, ownership of a home involves more than material possession. As Lena Cowen Orlin observes, 'early modern England ... locates the private in property'; Manwood argues that the ownership of property constitutes a right to such privacy.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, his use of pronouns ('my friends'; 'your servant') implies that property is composed of the human members of the household, as well as the dwelling itself.

Manwood's illustration illuminates the paradox of the 'home' as a concept. It is defined by the *OED* as a 'dwelling place; a person's house or abode; the fixed residence of a family or household; the seat of domestic life and interests' – a definition attached to the word's earliest usage in English.<sup>17</sup> It is thus at once defined by its borders, as a house or building in which people reside, and by its inhabitants: the 'household' with a shared 'domestic life'. Yet the house only becomes a home when inhabited by a 'family' (composed both of blood relatives and of dependants), and that potentially disparate family only becomes a household by residing within a house.<sup>18</sup> For a noble family, this may not be a single house, but various houses in which the family resides; the defining feature of the 'home' is that the family resides in each house together, as a unit.

Furthermore, as Frances Dolan notes, 'houses', which were perceived as 'related to a familial identity that includes not only offspring but ancestors, family honour, and property', were 'seen as an extension of the self'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the term 'property' was used to refer to 'a characteristic quality of a person or a thing'; 'the quality of being proper or appropriate'; 'a person's goods'; and 'the fact of owning something and being owned'.<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare makes use of these various readings in *Hamlet*, when Hamlet speaks of:

... a king  
 Upon whose property and most dear life  
 A damned defeat was made.  
 (II.ii.488–490)

The Norton Shakespeare glosses 'property' here as 'rightful sovereignty', yet Shakespeare's pun is more subtle: it refers to Old Hamlet's property as

the characteristic of kingship; his physical property, at once the crown and the kingdom; his wife, at once his property and an aspect of himself; and his self. Property, then, refers not only to ownership, but to appropriate or fit ownership that becomes an attribute of the person who owns, and is thus related to, 'propriety'; the home is quite literally viewed as an extension of the self, because having cannot be separated from being.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in *A Briefe Declaration*, dwelling and household both become extensions of the householder's self, at once reflecting upon him and existing under his authority. For Manwood, in his image of the garden overlooked by a neighbour, the home is at once the property and its inhabitants. The garden and the friends therefore belong to one neighbour, the servant to another, and it is not only that his property may be viewed by an outsider that vexes Manwood, but that this outsider may be the property, and thus the agent, of another. The gaze of the neighbour's servant becomes, by this analogy, the gaze of the neighbour himself, a trespassing gaze that penetrates Manwood's private world.

The 'sages' who undertake to argue this case for the public do not confine themselves to points of law. Rather, each imaginatively engages with the contested spaces, using illustrations and analogies that involve placing themselves within the homes under discussion. Consider, for example, the slippage in Manwood's argument, from the perceived wrongs done to J. S. to the imagined wrongs done to himself. He at first places himself beside J. S., as an imagined fellow sufferer, complaining that the installation of windows viewing 'our' garden is a wrong done to 'us'; however, he soon deposes J. S. as owner of the home, imagining his own friends and garden as spied upon by Hales' servant. Likewise, Master Plowden, the fourth of the lawyers, argues that if his neighbour builds 'to the uttermost of mine; [then] by your first building I am bridled and stopped of my building' (p.7): Plowden reimagines an attempt to arrest the building work of J. S. as a hypothetical attempt to stop the expansion of his own property. Indeed, both Plowden and Monson take the process still further, not only imaginatively inhabiting the homes of Hales and J. S., but inviting the reader into their own homes, as in Monson's illustration of a sick friend who enters into his home and pollutes his air.

As *A Briefe Declaration* demonstrates, the concept of home in early modern England is at once legally uncertain, ideologically conditioned, and inescapably personal. Questions of property and privacy, ownership and neighbourhood, are sufficiently vexed as to require analogies and illustrations to illuminate points of law, and are sufficiently significant to be of interest, in the case of a single legal quarrel, to the publisher, the

printer, and the reading public, over half a century after the quarrel itself took place. The structure of this book – ‘Home’, ‘Household’, ‘House’, and ‘Neighbourhood’ – at once borrows and interrogates the various charged conceptions of home that this pamphlet presents: home as a site of expectations, fantasies, and anxieties; home as a household composed of its participant members; home as a house that encloses these members and shapes their activities; and home as an environment that is vulnerable to invasion by both providential and ‘unwholesome’ influences from the outside world. In *A Brief Declaration*, terms used to describe the home, corresponding to the interlocking and contradictory models above, are emotive and personal; they also draw upon a common vocabulary of images and metaphors that recur throughout discourses concerning the home in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so that Bacon’s prison becomes Wray’s dungeon, and – when he casually refers to his ‘castle, or house’ – Monson’s home becomes his castle.

### The Home as Castle, the Home as State

Among the many metaphors used to describe, and construct, the home in early modern England, the home as castle is among the most popular, and the most significant. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, this image of the home as castle becomes an ironic comment on the fortunes of a knight with neither castle nor home: ‘There’s his chamber, his house, his castle, his standing-bed, and trucklebed’, declares Falstaff’s Host (iv.v.5–6). The comedy here is bathetic, lying in the juxtaposition of Falstaff’s noble birth and impoverished position; the Host can speak of Falstaff’s ‘house’ as a castle, but the dwelling in fact belongs to the Host himself, and Falstaff’s kingdom is shrunk to a standing-bed and a trucklebed beneath it.<sup>22</sup> His very household is shrunk to his ‘own people’ (ii.ii.48), whom he can no longer trust, and who are soon to betray him through masquerading as fairies in order to pinch and burn him. Falstaff owns no property, can command no followers, and is unable even to be private within his own chamber. ‘Fie’, cries the Host, ‘Privacy? Fie!’ (iv.v.18).

Yet the bathetic humour of Falstaff’s Host is only possible because of the prevalence of the fantasy of the home as castle in the popular imagination. Morris Palmer Tilley, in his *Dictionary of the Proverbs in England*, dates the earliest surviving use of the proverb ‘A man’s house is his castle’ to Richard Mulcaster’s conduct manual *Positions* (1581).<sup>23</sup> As Orlin observes, the image also appears in William Lambard’s legal treatise *Eirenarcha*, published the



same year: 'A man's house is his castle, which he may defend with force against any private army that shall invade him.'<sup>24</sup> The image soon became commonplace in 'the realms of proverb, of metaphor, and even of legal pronouncement'; by 1581, the image is already proverbial, as Lambarde uses it as a passing metaphor.<sup>25</sup> Lambarde, a gentleman landowner with a keen interest in legal matters, gained a place on the Kent 'commission of the peace' at about the time of *Eirenarcha's* publication; he later became deputy to Lord Burghley, as Master of the Alienation Office of Chancery.<sup>26</sup> The fact that Lambarde specifies that the castle may be defended against a 'private' army is noteworthy, for this implies that the image of the home as castle only applies as long as the home in question does not threaten the state; a man may defend himself against a private army, but not a public one.

Lambarde's treatise invokes the power, autonomy, and privacy implicit in the image of the castle as defensible property; yet the image also implies the old feudal system, in which such authority and autonomy, like the castle, are only retained as long as the state permits. Catherine Belsey describes marriage in this period as 'the site of a paradoxical struggle to create a private realm and to take control of it in the interests of the public good'; the same could be said of the home within which marriage is situated and experienced.<sup>27</sup> The image of the home as castle implies private power, but this power is borrowed, not bestowed.

To imagine the home as defensible is to imagine it as under threat, but the home as castle was also used as an image of peaceful security. Castle-homes appear in a tapestry valance (c. 1600–1610) designed to be hung 'above heavy curtains, around the top of a posted bed, which would have been a household's most valuable piece of furniture' (Fig. 0.1).<sup>28</sup> The valance portrays men and women hunting, hawking, bear-baiting, playing music, dancing, and flirting, in an idealised pastoral landscape.<sup>29</sup> They are surrounded by trees; hills; and an astonishing number of castles, complete with turrets and, in many cases, a moat and drawbridge. The proliferation of castles in the image suggests that these were not intended to represent real castles, in which a noble family would reside, but rather, the idea of the home as castle, in which an idealised image of the castle stands in for a house.

The valance allows the master or mistress (or, indeed, marital couple) lying upon the bed to participate in a fantasy of a world in which an Englishman's home is quite literally his castle, protected and defended from outside dangers by drawbridge and moat; yet the world outside presents no threat, as all the inhabitants of the neighbourhood may meet on what appears to be common land to indulge in communal pastimes. In this



Fig. 0.1 Detail from bed valance, c. 1600–1610, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, accession no. T.117–1934.

pastoral fantasy, security is rendered unnecessary even as it is propagated. The feudal hierarchy implied by the castle, in which the landscape where a castle is situated is peopled by those working for, and under the protection of, that castle, is imaginatively dismissed. Although possessing a tapestry as a bed hanging suggests a family of some means, the representation of the home as castle suggests that the person who originally commissioned the tapestry (or, at least, the implied purchaser) was not noble, and possessed no castle, but rather enjoyed contemplating a representation of rural England in which every man enjoys the private power of the home as castle, but lives in close proximity to his neighbours. The domestic ideal, at once aspirational, fanciful, and the myth by which the state was underpinned, could decorate the domestic interior.

Yet the private power implied in this image was not always represented as positive. In Mulcaster's aforementioned treatise on childhood behaviour, health, and education, he argues that the parent who educates his son at home 'is the appointer of his owne circumstance, and his house is his castle'.<sup>30</sup> Mulcaster notes that every parent that 'hath his children taught within his doares' may use 'his own liking' to determine his child's education, before discussing the benefits of public schools.<sup>31</sup> As the headmaster of the Merchant Taylors' School, Mulcaster had a vested interest in arguing against home education; yet it is striking that the image of the home as castle here implies private power that is not subject to public regulation. In arguing that the founding of schools is to be urged by all who 'favour the public weale, whose foundation is laid in these petie infantēs', Mulcaster suggests that the risk of home education lies in the autonomy of the home as castle: good education within the home may lay down the foundation of the commonwealth, but this foundation depends upon the (fallible)