

The False Domesticity of *A Woman Killed with Kindness*

LISA HOPKINS

One of the most memorable moments in Thomas Heywood's play *A Woman Killed with Kindness* comes in scene xiii, just before the climactic moment when the trusting Master Frankford will discover his wife Anne and his guest Wendoll locked in their adulterous embrace. For the space of ten lines, action is suspended for an extraordinary descriptive passage, as the apprehensive Frankford soliloquizes:

This is the key that opes my outward gate;
This is the hall door; this my withdrawing chamber.
But this, that door that's bawd unto my shame,
Fountain and spring of all my bleeding thoughts,
Where the most hallowed order and true knot
Of nuptial sanctity hath been profaned.
It leads to my polluted bed-chamber,
Once my terrestrial heaven, now my earth's hell,
The place where sins in all their ripeness dwell.
But I forget myself; now to my gate.¹

This passage, which serves no narrative purpose, is apparently included for two main reasons: it creates suspense, and it helps to develop atmosphere. In the broad daylight of an afternoon performance at an open-air theatre,² it was obviously necessary to introduce linguistic references to establish the location and feeling of a night-time scene, but Frankford's lines also do more than this. He had already told us that "now my watch's hand points upon twelve, / And it is dead midnight" (xiii.5-6); what he now adds is a strong sense of the physicality of the house.³ It is powerfully established as both symbolic and literal location, as the repeated images of penetration and the actual journey both culminate in the violated space of the bedchamber.

Such a strong sense of concrete location points directly to one of the chief fascinations of domestic tragedy: the voyeuristic attraction which comes from the sensation that we are witnessing the actual living space of a real family group. The appeal is in many ways the same as that which comes from peering through undrawn curtains into a lighted room, or that offered by fourth-wall drama or fly-on-the-wall documentaries; and as with documentaries or actual living-rooms, in the vast majority of domestic tragedies the compulsion to peer is strengthened by the knowledge that they represent real events. Behind *Arden of Faversham*, behind *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, lies genuine human suffering, imparting to them the fascination and vicarious involvement generated in our own age by the emotional dramas of the magazine problem page or the real-life crime programme.

Along with the added prurience bestowed by the knowledge that we are watching true stories, however, the domestic tragedies' origin in authentic events adds another dimension: they all partake of something of the incoherence and shapelessness which characterise most people's experience of life. Sharing to some extent some of the inconsequentiality of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, they are full of tiny details which obscure the clarity of the narrative line and resist the thematisation to which literary texts are normally so susceptible. There is, for instance, the obvious difficulty caused to the anonymous author of *Arden of Faversham* by his attempts to incorporate into his play the details of Arden's confrontation with Dick Reede, gleaned from a footnote in Holinshed,⁴ and also the interpretative crux which this creates for critics of the play. Reliance on Holinshed can cause difficulties in other genres too, as when Shakespeare makes Richard III despatch the Bishop of Ely for strawberries or Buckingham enter in rotten armour (not to mention the infamous complexities of Lady Macbeth's children), but the problems caused by such direct transcription of circumstantial detail are both more pronounced and more obvious in domestic tragedies.

A Woman Killed with Kindness, however, is set apart from other products of the genre by the fact that the story on which it was based was entirely invented by Heywood. Paradoxically, though, it nevertheless retains much of the air of specificity and of redundancy of detail which habitually characterises domestic tragedy and other modes of "realistic"

writing.⁵ We are told, for instance, that it is in York Castle that Sir Charles Mountford is imprisoned, and Susan's requests for financial assistance are rebuffed by not only one but three named kinsmen, as well as by a tenant; moreover, we are told not only of Frankford's progress through the house but also of other apparently minor domestic details such as the playing of cards and the goings-on in the servants' hall. The resultant effect is to create both an atmosphere of domesticity and also the traditional genre markers of domestic tragedy; but both are, in fact, an illusion.

Although the details we are given in the play may appear superficially to resemble the random information which is the residue of direct transcription from sources, anything but the most cursory of readings will clearly detect that they are actually the most carefully selected and shaped: art masquerades as life, and what may initially appear to be a quasi-Chekhovian surplus of information about characters which resists overt thematisation is revealed as in fact thoroughly subservient to the play's overriding moral message. This double effect—of apparently minor details which are in fact invested with great thematic, emotional and symbolic significance—is exemplified in the very first exchange of the play:

SIR FRANCIS

Some music there! None lead the bride a dance?

SIR CHARLES

Yes, would she dance 'The Shaking of the Sheets.'

But that's the dance her husband means to lead her.

(i.1-3)

"The Shaking of the Sheets" was a popular tune; its use as the setting of a ballad would, additionally, make it suitable for a rustic style of dancing, rather than for the more complicated steps found in courtly circles. The reference to this specific dance serves, therefore, clearly to locate both the characters and the play itself firmly in the humble world of domestic tragedy, rather than in the grander milieu frequented by Aristotle's tragic hero. It also, however, has obvious thematic significance both in its applicability to a wedding—with its bawdy connotations of sexual consummation—and its original reference, in the context of the song, to dying, which will indeed be the ultimate end to which Anne's husband will lead her.

Other details prove similarly resonant and thematisable. The emblematic appropriateness of the lute, broken by Anne after her exile from her husband's house, is obvious enough;⁶ and the apparently complex history of Susan's dealings with her kinsfolk when she is pleading for money to redeem her brother from prison can in fact be seen as modelled not so much on the inchoateness of real life as on the similar, morally patterned sequence of rejections in *Everyman*. Other events resonantly echo each other, as when Frankford and Sir Charles both kill, Sir Francis and his sister both undergo a moral redemption, and Nick's apparently causeless dislike of Wendoll on sight foreshadows Sir Francis' falling in love at first sight. A similar symmetry aligns the main plot and the sub-plot: in both, a house figures largely, and is also intimately associated with the body of a woman—Frankford's house provides the images of penetration appropriate to Anne's adulterous coupling with Wendoll, while Sir Charles' decision to offer Susan to his enemy Acton is partially forced on him by his reluctance to sell the house which is all that remains to him of his patrimony. In both plots, moreover, a career of sin is abruptly arrested by its unexpected encounter with a grand gesture, as Acton finds himself deflected from his pursuit of vengeance and Anne from her adulterous passion by the supererogatory "kindness" of Sir Charles' offer of his sister and Frankford's of forgiveness; and in both plots the key to the resolution of events resides in the question of female chastity.

Even one of the most apparently arbitrary of all the play's details can be read as significant. The choice of a northern setting, indicated by the confinement of Sir Charles in York Castle, may initially appear to be random, but it is also possible to read the play in terms of the specific connotations which the north of England would have had for a contemporary audience. The area was prominent in early Jacobean consciousness primarily for its continuing adherence to the "Old Religion," Catholicism, and its associated tendency to recalcitrance and rebellion: its tenacity in refusing to embrace the tenets of the Reformation had led to a series of politico-religious disturbances such as the Pilgrimage of Grace and the Rising of the Northern Earls, and it continued profoundly resistant to social or religious change. In most domestic tragedy, the setting is predetermined by the actual locality in

which the historical crime took place; here, the area near York has been deliberately selected. Although Catholicism is never mentioned in the play, the 1991 Royal Shakespeare Company production at The Other Place did much to bring out its potential applicability for readings of the play. Liberally sprinkled with crucifixes, genuflections, characters crossing themselves and chanting, Katie Mitchell's interpretation situated Anne's self-starvation firmly in the context of Catholic ideology about the female body and the question of the relative superiority of words and deeds in the process of repentance and redemption, so that unusual attention was directed to an examination of the precise nature of the play's title quality, "kindness," and the ways in which this well-intentioned attitude interacts with a fallible world. The production served to show that as well as adding an element of local colour, the play's northern location may also function as another site of specific meaning.

Another aspect of the play which might initially appear to be an attempt to mimic life, but which on closer inspection is revealed as a deliberate product of art, is the activities of the servants. On one level, Nick can be seen as functioning as a kind of chorus, voicing a normative reaction but remaining emotionally distanced and largely unaffected by the outcome of events; and this presence of a choral element not only serves to guide audience reaction but also functions as another genre marker to differentiate this play from the humbler forms of domestic drama by aligning it with the far more culturally privileged classical tragedies from which the role of the chorus was originally derived. In Scene ii, however, Nick plays another role. It is he who is appointed arbiter of the dispute about dance, but his judgement is immediately overruled, just as Frankford's authority over his wife and guest is flouted; and when a dance finally is chosen, the stage direction says, oddly, that "NICK, *dancing, speaks stately and scurvily, the rest after the country fashion*" (54, s.d.). "Stately and scurvily," whatever its primary meaning may originally have been, clearly functions as an invitation to read this scene as a direct comment on class relations, a theme which is further emphasised when the servants' failure to agree on a choice of dance is echoed by the gentry's disagreement over the card game. Thus what appears to be little more than a catalogue of country dances, not susceptible of any thematising interpretation, functions as a comment on the fact that the gentry classes' superior wealth and education

modifies only the form, and not the substance, of their behaviour, just as the behaviour of the lower classes in *The Cherry Orchard* offers a similarly ironic commentary on the doings of their "betters."

The card game scene, however, does more than echo the dance one. It is perhaps another comment on the relationship between thematisation and cultural privilege that whereas the servants' recreations have apparently arbitrary and meaningless names, those of the gentry are overtly significant: Noddy, Double Ruff, Knove Out of Doors, Saint, New Cut, all are obviously appropriate to the characters for whom they are proposed. The symmetry apparent in these two episodes thus performs a twofold function: it reflects badly on the upper echelons of the play's society, by serving to reveal them as no better than their social and financial inferiors, and it also points up a related issue—the traditional difference in classification between domestic tragedy, 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, and classical tragedy, the Aristotelian fall of the hero, moralised, shaped by irony, fate and art, and redolent with thematic and symbolic significance.

Heywood's insistent use of detail seems, then, to serve a double purpose. On the one hand, it simulates the air of authenticity which serves to invest domestic tragedy with so large a part of its appeal; on the other, the fact that his details are both artificial and, even more importantly, obviously thematically significant serves in fact to elevate the play to a status grander, more "literary," than that of traditional domestic tragedy. It has none of the journalistic, ad hoc air which has led to so many other examples of the genre failing to survive; the kind of reading processes which it requires are substantially the same as those called for by tragedies such as *Hamlet* or *Othello*, which have, notoriously, been traditionally interpreted as dealing with concerns universally applicable. By fictionalising reality, Heywood has not only made the genre more up-market, but has also highlighted the processes by which he has done so, and has drawn our attention to the complex interactions between individual stories and the politically and aesthetically weighted genre markers which frame them.

NOTES

¹Thomas Heywood, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, ed. Brian Scobie (London: Black, 1985) xiii.8-17. All quotations from the play are taken from this edition.

²The play was probably acted at the Red Bull. See Scobie 65, note on xiii.18.

³For the importance of houses in the play, see for instance Michel Grivelet, *Thomas Heywood et le drame domestique élisabéthain* (Paris: Didier, 1957) 212, and Scobie, Introd. xv-xvi.

⁴For the *Arden* author's reliance on Holinshed and for his handling of the Reede episode, see Keith Sturgess, ed., *Three Elizabethan Domestic Tragedies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) Introd. 21 and 24.

⁵For a discussion of the concept of "descriptive residue," see Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1975) 193.

⁶See Cecile W. Cary, "'Go Breake This Lute': Music in Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," *RenD* ns 2 (1969): 123-47.