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SEPARATION SCENES

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Separation Scenes

Domestic Drama in Early Modern England

ANN C. CHRISTENSEN

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I dedicate this book to the
memory of my mother,
Patricia Ann Christensen,
a sitter on doorsteps.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi
Introduction: Absent Husbands and Unpartnered Wives in Early Modern England	I
1. Housekeeping and Forlorn Travel in <i>Arden of Faversham</i>	33
2. The Doorstep and the Exchange in <i>A Warning for Fair Women</i>	69
3. One Man's Calling in <i>A Woman Killed with Kindness</i>	103
4. Women, Work, and Windows in <i>Women Beware Women</i>	141
5. The East India Company and the Domestic Economy in <i>The Launching of the Mary, or The Seaman's Honest Wife</i>	177
Epilogue: John and Anne Donne and the Culture of Business	213
NOTES	219
BIBLIOGRAPHY	265
INDEX	285

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Emblem of the wife's virtues, 1586 52
2. Basket woman, illustration from
The Cryes of the City of London, 1711 201

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SEPARATION SCENES

Introduction

Absent Husbands and Unpartnered Wives in Early Modern England

“Fond Chimny Cricket know that travailes way
Is danger, and adventure: and no play.”

—BAPTIST GOODALL, *The Tryall of Travell*

“whereas for the man, the house is not so much a
place he enters as a place he comes out of, movement
inwards properly befits the woman.”

—PIERRE BOURDIEU, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*

With their husbands halfway out the door, wives in domestic drama implore them to delay business and stay home, sometimes in earnest, more often not, and always in vain. Bianca begs Leantio for “[b]ut this one night” in *Women Beware Women* by Thomas Middleton (1.3.49); Anne Frankford frets, “I hope your business craves no such dispatch / That you must ride tonight” in Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (11.57–58); and Alice Arden assents, “Yet if thy business be of great import, / Go if thou wilt; I’ll bear it as I may” (*Arden of Faversham* 1.402–3).¹ The husbands leave, the wives commit adultery, and murder (or other forms of violence and death) follows. The absent-husband scenario is a familiar and a seemingly timeless narrative formula, with sometimes comic, sometimes tragic endings. Consider the enduring stories of men who leave wives and families behind as they are called to war or to sea, held in captivity or marooned, driven to mobility by poverty, persecution, enslavement, or their own wanderlust. From the

oft-retold French story of the return of Martin Guerre to the songs of nineteenth-century New England whalers' wives and modern comic films like *Too Many Husbands* (1940), men leave, and, of course, some never return.² From Penelope to Portuguese Fado singers, from Clytemnestra to Mrs. Mallard in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," women await news of absent husbands, hoping for or dreading reunions with them.³ This sample (in an inexhaustible list) makes the problem of absent husbands seem global and transhistorical, if not universal. Yet the problem gained particular urgency and currency in England when expanding and intensifying commerce required more men to travel. Domestic drama of the early modern period deliberated this problem by staging domesticity while husbands are absent on business.

Business travel affected the conception and conduct of domestic life in the age of England's commercial expansion by requiring men to leave the homes they were to head. Global trade stimulated and intensified local travel among all sectors within the commercial classes, demanding greater mobility from merchants and mariners, as well as gentlemen-investors, shipwrights, watermen, and others employed in support industries.⁴ M. J. Power estimates that well over half of East London mariners (or 63 percent) were away at sea in the second decade of the seventeenth century, showing that "[p]rolonged absence posed problems for wives and families left at home."⁵ Keith Wrightson documents the elaboration and tightening of "networks of internal commerce" that responded to the increased volume and demand for goods, along with the distances that merchants and merchandize traveled at home.⁶ Andrew McRae, with similar attention to the intensifying occupational travel within England's borders shows how "[s]uch processes of mobility lent shape to some of the definitive transformations of the era: from the shift towards capitalism, through the ongoing spatial redistribution of the population, to the political reconceptualization of passive subjects as active citizens."⁷ Because travelers were also householders and husbands, masters and fathers, their absence had "transforming" effects at home.⁸ My book therefore establishes domesticity as an essential yet largely overlooked site shaped by male absence; a site that intersected with the eco-

conomic, demographic, and political processes that other scholars have catalogued; and a site where dramatists locate the (often tragic) consequences of business travel.

This connection between the inauguration and vogue of domestic drama and England's commercial expansion in the 1590s is evident in a core set of plays in the genre that makes the absence of husbands for business the "subject of tragedy," to borrow Catherine Belsey's phrase.⁹ In fact the departures of men and their households' accommodation of their absence constitute the main plots of all the plays discussed in the following five chapters: the anonymous *Arden of Feversham* (c. 1592), the focus of the next chapter; *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599), in chapter 2; Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607) in chapter 3; Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (c. 1613–21) in chapter 4; and *The Launching of the Mary, or The Seaman's Honest Wife* (1632–33) in chapter 5.¹⁰

The local and regional travel undertaken by husbands like Thomas Arden and Middleton's Leantio differs in degree *but not in kind* from the long-term and long-distance travel required by international commerce. In other words, using these absent husbands and domestic settings, playwrights developed a new form to articulate the broader cultural concerns brought home (literally) from an expanding commercial world. In light of commercial and professional duties increasingly taking husbands away from home, playwrights (and others) asked, How did the absence of husbands affect remaining household members and the labor, activities, goods, and occupations of the household? How did families reconcile men's professional "callings" with their domestic obligations, and how did wives and households accommodate men's absence? How did absent husbands understand, conceptualize, and evaluate their dependence on and longing for their wives and households back home? How was domestic space experienced during periods of male absence and presence?¹¹ Other related questions arise when we keep in mind that the home was no "private sphere" of "play," as my epigraph from Baptist Goodall implies, but a crossroads of community; a site for domestic production and, hence, female agency; and a participant in the processes of globalization.¹² Domestic drama

responded to questions like these by representing men's commercial travel as disruptive to domestic conduct. The core set of domestic drama that I examine in this book was a dynamic and critical cultural form that used householders' disruptive commercial travel to resist the emerging ideology of the separation of the spheres.

The Drama of Separate Spheres, a New Critical Approach

The four tragedies and the little-known hybrid play in this study could be called something like absent-husband or separate-spheres dramas. However, because all but *Launching of the Mary* are recognizable as domestic tragedy, I find that category useful as a kind of family tree for the plays that I call "domestic drama." New and popular at the end of the sixteenth century and most often set in contemporary England, domestic tragedy is a generic grouping that modern scholars have recognized for a number of innovations: chiefly the middling or bourgeois status of their characters and concerns (as distinct from the nobility and the poor); a "reduction in scale" from tragedies of state; and the violent, often "true" crimes depicted.¹³ In addition to the subset that I consider here, critics typically also include Robert Yarrington's *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601); *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), attributed to Shakespeare and more recently to Middleton; Samuel Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621); and Shakespeare's *Othello* (1602–3). Critics suggest that this drama is equally invested in the ordinary and extraordinary operations of marriage in particular (for example arranged, clandestine, or estranged); of family generally (including matters of sexuality and social status); of the household and its intersections with neighborhood, credit and reputation; and of the obligations of service, hospitality, and housewifery. Erupting into crises of ambition, suspicion, adultery, and violence (most often through murder that is always discovered and punished), these tragic plots often also include evidentiary and legal dimensions.¹⁴ Domestic tragedy, most broadly construed, is also often seen to have a cautionary tale component, suggested by titular terms like "warning," "lamentable," and "beware." Previously relegated to the status of "dramatized homilies," plays such as *Arden of Faversham* are now

recognized for their complex engagements with the social, political, aesthetic, and economic, as they relate, for example, to questions of national identity, theatrical genre, and gender categories.¹⁵

Critics use different but related criteria to explore the various ways that domestic tragedies organize visible and ideological articulations of what is tragic about domesticity and how tragedy can have a domestic focus. Because feminist scholars of early modern domesticity understand prescription and legislation within domestic-conduct literature and law as anxious (re)assertions of traditional hierarchies in the face of the new pressures on marriage and family life, they find the “multivocal genre” of domestic drama an especially robust cultural form representing domestic life in crisis.¹⁶ I agree that domestic dramatists gather the social tensions and contradictions irresolvable within traditional domestic discourses and, in staging them, permit the “irresolution” of everyday life to confront and also coexist with formulaic prescriptions and regulations.¹⁷

Three overlapping feminist historicist approaches to early modern English society and drama inform my own methodology: (1) scholarship on post-Reformation constructions of gender roles and sexuality with respect to the institutions of marriage and household structure and conduct;¹⁸ (2) studies that address theatrical and social performances of domesticity and violence;¹⁹ and (3) studies of domestic labor, space, and environment.²⁰ In the past critics focused emphatically on the sexual (mis)conduct of the wife. But today the “domestic” in “domestic tragedy” is widely understood to extend beyond what Rebecca Ann Bach once derided as “the space of the heterosexual bedroom” and what Catherine Richardson sees as the “emotional dynamics [of] . . . family members.” For these and other scholars, the genre does not isolate the husband-wife dyad (though it does stress the “centrality of the physical household”).²¹ Lena Cowen Orlin’s definition of the ways in which domestic tragedy “materialize[s] the house in all its associations” outlines the direction of much subsequent criticism:

first, as the primary social and economic unit of early modern English culture; second, as a construction delimiting a world-in-little and

accommodating it occupants' most basic physical needs for shelter and sustenance as well as their psychological needs for beauty and perdurability; and finally, as an ideological construct receptive to the superimposition of political models and moral regulations.²²

Scholarship on gender, sexuality, and marriage has developed from mid-twentieth-century assumptions about women's innate lustfulness to nuanced analyses of institutional pressures on gender roles within (and without) marriage. For example Paula McQuade reveals the structural limitations on women's "moral capacity" within Protestant marriage in the period, thereby complicating our interpretations of such concepts as sin, in contrast to earlier critical views of the murderous wife figure as simply a "bourgeois Clytemnestra."²³

Along with widening the scope for understanding early modern definitions of femininity and masculinity within marriage and household, feminist critics in recent decades have also brought attention to domestic tragedies' treatment of intramural violence, and the public and private facets of crime and punishment.²⁴ In particular Frances E. Dolan analyzes cultural representations of murderous wives, servants, and other subordinates in her work on domestic crime and domestic tragedy in the period, a topic also taken up by Ariane Balizet in another way. Whereas Dolan pursues the legal and juridical and dimensions of true-crime domestic tragedies, Balizet focuses on the ideological and performative dimensions of "blood and home" in plots of domestic transgression and violence.²⁵ Both Dolan and Balizet theorize and historicize in particularly useful ways post-Reformation representations of home as feminine space, masculine space, or both.

Property, household space, and other aspects of the economy and the environment are among the elements that domestic tragedy engages with as feminist materialist critics like Catherine Richardson have also shown. Rooms, properties, and activities associated with home life contain information about gender, hierarchy, and sometimes civic and national identifications. And, as my work shows, business and mobility are likewise dense transfer points of meaning in the plays. These different settings, objects, and so on manifest onstage in the form of (say)

tables, candles, and supper crumbs in *Woman Killed with Kindness*, and a crowded London lane in *Arden*. Offstage, they are imagined in the wife's meal preparation and the husband's activity on the Exchange in *Warning for Fair Women*. Mindful of these differences, Richardson accounts for the "physical shape and the nature of [the household's] different rooms," to conclude that "the majority of the action of these plays takes place within the house, but that enclosed world is subject to the scrutiny and judgment of family, friends . . . [and] the community surrounding" the households.²⁶

I extend these feminist studies to show the absence of husbands as vitally defining the "enclosed" yet scrutinized domestic world, a fact that informs the somatic and the spatial, the theatrical and the juridical. While some critics have also observed correlations between the absence of a husband and the vulnerability of the wife and household in domestic tragedy, none has shown, as I do, that because these plays explicitly ascribe male absence to the culture of business, they thereby connect domestic dissolution to business travel. Dolan, for example, notes that a husband's "prolonged absences diminish the effectiveness of . . . surveillance and expose its inadequacy" so that "household and marriage confine without protecting [the wife]." Dolan's analyses of violence and domestic crime in popular literature and drama observe the penetrability of "the violated home," and, particularly, the commonly staged and ideologically charged sites of bed and board.²⁷ For Dolan the husband's absence (in, for instance, *Warning for Fair Women* and *Yorkshire Tragedy*) prevents the protection of "his own domestic interests," and such men fail as householders by "abdication" of place, privilege, and power, rather than governing. A husband leaves for reasons of "riotous living" or in "retreat" from an oppressive family, as in *Yorkshire Tragedy*; or to give his wife the space to reform, like the willing cuckold Arden; or to conduct business on the Exchange, like George Sanders in *Warning for Fair Women*. Both Dolan and Orlin have analyzed such absences in terms of what they see as the domestic governor's "abdication" of authority.²⁸

Although I concur that household failures do follow in the wake of husbands' absence, I argue that these situations are presented less as

matters of voluntary “abdication” than as conditions of employment in a commercial milieu. Furthermore the surrender or even the temporary transfer of domestic power from absent husband to present wife is never a given, but always gnarled. Building from Dolan’s and Orlin’s frameworks, this book demonstrates the ways that business travel *in particular*—not only business and not merely absence—troubles domestic life. Absence for commercial travel is as basic to the core domestic dramas as other social, economic, and theatrical factors discussed by critics.²⁹ Whereas a husband’s absence for business was seen as legitimate—“necessary” when following his “lawfull” calling, as William Perkins and other domestic conduct writers defined certain travel in the period, playwrights put pressure on that formulation to show the effects of male absence on the understandings and experiences of both home and business.³⁰

In the remainder of this introduction, I outline a new taxonomy for domestic drama and then review the ways in which the requirements for men’s local or internal travel impacted domestic life in the period. In order to illustrate this drama’s relationship to other cultural forms with similar concerns, I compare and contrast, in brief, period guides to marriage and guides to travel, demonstrating that neither hortatory genre offered practical advice or a theory for households with husbands absent. Finally I couple Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the gendered experiences of domestic space and public space with Edmund Tilney’s sixteenth-century prescription for marriage to suggest that domestic dramatists formulate these gendered experiences in ways that challenge the ideology of the separation of the spheres, even as this ideology was emerging.

Staging Domesticity (in the Absence of Husbands)

Men’s absence for business compromises marital cohabitation, a fact that shapes thematic and theatrical elements in these plays, particularly those related to conflicts with domestic authority. In every play, a husband departs because he is called to do business elsewhere. This call to travel catalyzes plot conflicts and invites specific theatrical stratagems, namely what I call “separation scenes” set on domestic and other

types of thresholds, and the “split-screen effect,” used to suggest the simultaneity of, yet distinction between, events occurring at home and abroad. Each device accentuates male departures and marks as separate but related the spaces of business and domesticity. The man’s absence unpartners his wife, increasing her autonomy, but not necessarily her authority at home. In Thomas Tusser’s wildly popular (and variously titled and augmented) *Five Hundreth Points of Good Husbandry and Good Housewifery*, an absent husband poses no problem: “When husband is absent, let housewife be chief,” compressed by the author yet further: “Man out, housewife chief.”³¹ Despite the fact that writers of domestic conduct literature like Tusser sanctioned the deputation of wives in husbands’ absence (absences almost always understood as temporary), such transfers of power challenged the prescriptive ideals for household order and marital cohabitation that these same writers also assumed and prescribed. These challenges, in turn, exacerbated anxieties about domestic control in general and women’s sexual behavior in particular while husbands were away. These anxieties manifest onstage in wives’ adultery (or its threat), the murder of husbands (or other violence), punishments for wives’ abuse of marriage in domestic tragedies, and other types of disruption and hardship.

On the stage business travel is urgent and usually imperative, with every husband asserting that he *must* leave home, whether in answer to a summons from a patron or an attorney, in the expectation of a “rich workmaster,” or for a dinner with a fellow merchant.³² Business has a strong discursive force in these plays, though it is rarely staged in any detail. Notably characters *speak of* men’s commercial obligations and the destinations of their travel, but audiences see, for example, neither Frankford’s arrival when he rides “out of town” in act 6 of *Woman Killed with Kindness*, nor the sea, ships, or eastern ports of the mariners who have already sailed before *Launching of the Mary* opens (*Woman Killed with Kindness* 6.63). Instead playwrights rely on domestic thresholds and interiors to suggest the master’s presence elsewhere, while dramatizing fully the impact of his absence on the home. Likewise the places of business are merely glimpsed or imagined altogether offstage, such as the reported stops along George Sanders’s daily itinerary in *Warn-*

ing for Fair Women, or the warehouse where Leantio labors in *Women Beware Women*. Instead of properties associated with the commercial world, like those used in city comedies, such as bills of exchange, purses, and merchandize, domestic tragedy's props, staging, and characterization generally relate either to domestic life or to men's travel. Absent-husband plays thus call for keys and windows, slippers and riding boots, maidservants, highwaymen, and ferrymen, among others.

Because of this common interest in business travel, playwrights stage and use imagery relating to mobility, such as streets, roads, and rivers. For example, because Arden's business ventures keep him continually in motion, he appears along the quays and roads of Kent, and in the streets and stalls of London, and he is reported at the Faversham Fair; meanwhile London merchant George Sanders's business connections in *Warning for Fair Women* take him only as far as the Exchange, Lombard Street, Woolwich, and Greenwich court. Regardless of distances traversed, both merchants are represented almost always in states of leaving or returning home. The Yorkshire gentleman Frankford in *Woman Killed with Kindness* departs twice on horseback—once for some legitimate business, and again on a trumped-up legal matter that presumably calls him to York. And although his business is never identified as commercial, as I will show, the staging of his exits and the domestic consequences of his absence are the same as in the other domestic drama. The husband's business in *Women Beware Women* is that of a commercial factor, a kind of agent or representative for a merchant, who must serve out the workweek away from his newly settled home. The exits and returns of gentleman, merchant, and factor alike dominate staging or discourse or both in the tragedies. Employed in a commercial role similar to that of a factor, the mariner husband in *Launching of the Mary* also travels, remaining offstage (presumably aboard ship) throughout the play; his absence, though not his exit, determines the domestic plot of that play. Playwrights in this core group of domestic drama use business (and also consistently the actual term "business") to justify the husbands' absence that creates the drama.

The householder's absence leaves his wife alone and made vulnerable to incursion, but she also gains new power over domestic arrangements,

allowing her to transgress. Thus the wives occupying homes vacated by husbands—Alice Arden in *Arden of Faversham*, Anne Sanders in *Warning for Fair Women*, Anne Frankford in *Woman Killed with Kindness*, Bianca Capelli in *Women Beware Women*, and Dorotea Constance in *Launching of the Mary*—constitute another defining element in domestic drama. Instead of assuming the expected role and status of deputy husband that conferred the temporary expansion of domestic authority onto them, none of these wives is properly deputed. These characters also elicit a new category with a term I have repurposed: “unpartnered wife.” Extrapolating the term that Orlin uses in another, more literal context, I adapt “unpartnered” for women who are married, and hence neither widowed nor maids, but whose husbands are not physically present.³³ No extant critical term quite captures this situation of being married to an absent spouse: “singlewomen,” for example, typically denotes “never married.”³⁴ The phrase “fictive widows” has been used to characterize women whose husbands “for one reason or another, were unwilling or unable to govern them,” but this concept conveys neither the real spatial separation of spouses nor the representation of the travel by men as “needful” or sanctioned (rather than willful), even as it “unpartners” their wives.³⁵ “Women without men” is a category that accounts for the professional absences of husbands, as Bernard Capp explains in his study *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England*. Sailors’ wives and other—usually poor—women, Capp notes, might relocate or otherwise shift on their own while spouses performed or sought work elsewhere.³⁶ “Unpartnered” as I use it, applies across the commercial classes to bourgeois and gentle characters like Anne Sanders and Anne Frankford, as well as mariners’ wives like those in the riverside hamlets of *Launching of the Mary*, whose own “hard hand labour” barely keeps them alive (line 2584). The “un-” prefix, suggesting both “not” and “and,” further highlights that these wives occupied a kind of social limbo—at once partnered and alone. For example, wives of men “lost at sea” could not claim widowhood (or remarry) until five to seven years had passed with no word from the spouses.³⁷ In following the consequences at home of men’s travel, I want “unpartnered” also to

reflect the pervasive “state of rupture” that Patricia Fumerton evokes with her term “unsettled.”³⁸ Ultimately “unpartnered” captures the fact that husbands in many professional occupations across the commercial classes might be in the picture, that is, nominally part of a household, and yet also *absent* from the portrait of daily life.

Along with men’s call to business and the unpartnering of their wives, domestic drama stages conflicts through the dramaturgy of separation scenes set at various thresholds. Family farewells, violent reunions, and illicit meetings occur at gates, where, for example, Alice Arden meets her lover; on stoops and at doorways, where Captain Browne pesters Anne Sanders, who waits there for her husband’s return; beneath windows, of the sort that Leantio ponders in *Women Beware Women*; and through internal doorways, such as those inside Frankford’s violated house in Heywood’s play. Wives are accosted from windows where they “sit to work” (as Dorotea in *Launching of the Mary*, *osd*, 2398) or whence they bid farewell to spouses (like Bianca in *Women Beware Women*, 1.3).

These threshold spaces and related props, such as keys, focus audience attention not only on the separations that always occur at these apertures, but also on the local consequences of men’s absence. Every play founded on an absent husband depends on the husband’s exit, of course, and men exit through stage doors (and discursively constructed ones). However, every play founded on an absent husband also features windows, doors, and other interstices that exceed requirements of plot. These thresholds form networks of moral and metaphoric signification. As Richardson has shown, domestic “borders and boundaries” perform physical as well as moral functions, in both enclosing and rendering permeable the home. “While the house was to form a coherent moral unit seamlessly divided from the outside world, within which mutual responsibilities could be established, it was rarely so regular as physical entity and frustration worked into the cracks between the physical and the ideological boundaries of the household like frost.”³⁹

A similar and equally prominent dramaturgical technique that represents visually the separation of spouses is the “split-screen effect” that presents or suggests events succeeding so quickly as to force their very strong juxtapositions, if not actual simultaneity. When a

film divides the screen, often in a diagonal half, the effect is to convey concurrence, for instance two sides of a phone conversation like the discrete bedrooms in *Indiscreet* (1958). Absent-husband plays use a similar technique to split the stage when the husband, leaving on business, exits and a second character (the soon-to-be lover) enters at the same stage location. Suggesting visually that the latter man replaces the former, this succession happens exactly when husbands leave (the stage) on business, and in one case, just before he returns home from business. In probably the best-known example of this phenomenon, Bianca bids good-bye to her husband from her window “above,” and, almost immediately, the Duke “look[s] up” as he passes beneath the same window in Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* (1.3.osd, 12, and line 106). Similarly *Warning for Fair Women* suggests two separate but concurrent meals—the one, when Anne Sanders and the plotters against her husband’s life enact in dumb show a symbolic “bloody feast,” and the other, at the exact time as the intended victim shares a (presumably more nutritious) meal offstage with business associates at the very beginning of scene 5 (line 788). The effect of this “split” is to highlight the fact that the Sanders family is already divided by business, implying that the conspiracy occurs in part *because* George Sanders misses meals at home.

These stage spaces—doorways, gates, stoops, and windows—dramatize conflicts and vulnerabilities within and between husband and wife that reveal the contradictions within and between the prescriptive discourses of the household and the emerging conditions of business. These theatrical thresholds, like real ones, bear great weight; they literally frame departures and returns, while also bearing the symbolic weight of men’s absence and the unknown (to them) activities of wives and others within. From these points husbands depart for business; to these places other men arrive; and at these places unpartnered wives conduct their domestic and erotic affairs. Theorizing the spatial divisions within households and between a household and community, Richardson argues that the “façade of the house . . . mediates between the domestic and the communal.” For Richardson the threshold, a location frequently mentioned in adultery depositions, “concentrates

attention not so much on domestic space, but on the crucial point of contact between the house and the town.”⁴⁰ Extending Richardson’s conceptualization, I argue that in domestic drama, thresholds stand for both the contact *and division* between homes and the commercial world that calls men away, in this way shifting the focus to the interactions between the home and the broader economy that are initiated by the husband’s travel for business.

Business compels men’s truancy from home, generates plots, determines characterization, and enriches the significance of stage properties. It is *only* when and because husbands depart that the adulterous interlopers can act: Mosby in *Arden of Feversham*, Captain Browne in *Warning for Fair Women*, the Duke of Florence in *Women Beware Women*, Wendoll in *Woman Killed with Kindness*, and the army (navy) of suitors that besieges Dorotea Constance in *Launching of the Mary*. By emphasizing the husband’s lawful calling as the primary cause of his absence from home (rather than his neglect, moral dissolution, or voluntary relinquishment of responsibility), domestic drama (and this study) places particular emphasis on the prompt of business, showing its demands competing with those of domestic life.

Along with conflicts between the absent husband and the unpartnered wife—conflicts at once based in and dramaturgically located at the threshold between domesticity and business—domestic drama builds characters’ internal landscapes, which are likewise inflected with business travel. Thus the tragic man of domestic drama concentrates on his duties to business and duties at home, whereas a Hamlet or a Hieronimo (from Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*) is preoccupied with an otherworldly injunction, and whereas King Lear suffers when he relinquishes power, the domestic hero wonders, “should I stay or should I go?” For example Arden agrees to “lie with . . . [his friend] at London all this term” even while he realizes that such a separation from home “abhors from reason”: “yet I’ll try it” (1.48–54). Similarly Leantio anguishes between going out to the warehouse and going back to bed in *Women Beware Women*. In many of these plays, the husband registers ambivalently his need to travel to support his wife and sustain his worth, on the one hand, and his domestic obligations,

including marital cohabitation and love, on the other. These internal divisions exacerbate or cause absent and returning husbands to distrust and become jealous of wives (as in the cases of Arden and Leantio); to temporarily disregard the domestic world he leaves behind (as Sanders and Frankford do); and to accuse wives of distracting them or of draining household resources, as each absenting man implicitly or explicitly does.

Cocks and Hens: Naturalizing Male Absence in Domestic Conduct Literature

Traditional domestic conduct literature minimizes the impact of or overlooks entirely the absence of husbands. Domestic conduct writers presented men's absence as natural in the abstract, though extraordinary in the particular, and as rare contingencies, rather than the common occurrences that they were becoming.⁴¹ For example, according to Edmund Tilney's *The Flower of Friendship* (1568):

The office of the husbände is to bring in necessaries, of the wife, well to kepe them. The office of the husbände is to go abroad in matters of profite, of the wife, to tarry at home, and see all be well there. The office of the husbände is to provide money, of the wife, not to wastfully spend it. The office of the husbände is, to deale, and bargaine with all men, of the wife, to make or meddle with no man. The office of the husbände is, to give, of the wife, to keepe. . . . [T]he office of the husbände is, to maintain well his lyvlihood, and the office of the woman is, to governe well the houshold.⁴²

According to this oft-quoted tally sheet, the husband's absence is an assumed and natural precondition for the provision of the household: he is to "bring in," "go abroad in matters of profite," and so on. The wife's equally assumed and natural position is "to tarry at home," and, crucially, to actively support the household through her frugal housewifery. Yet, while prescriptive texts treat husbands' absence as natural in this abstract way, they fail to account for the particular problems of household government and cohabitation while men are away. William

Gouge in his advice on the “common mutuall duties betwixt Man and Wife” in *Of Domestical Duties*, for example, does sketch the “just causes” for absent spouses, be they mariners, merchants, lawyers, courtiers, or women nursing the sick. For Gouge in these cases both parties must consent to the separation, and neither “take . . . delight to live asunder: . . . No distance, or absence ought any whit to diminish their mutuall love.”⁴³ Despite the fact that internal traffic increasingly called men from home, whether to the Exchange or to court for a morning or to London for a month, and while global commerce required mariners to sail to and serve for indefinite periods, domestic advice books persistently showed men’s absence as the exception rather than the rule.

The spatial and gendered division of labor endured largely unchanged in sermons and treatises throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth centuries. For example Henry Smith’s *A Preparatiue to Marriage* (London, 1591) presents husband and wife “like two birds”:

the one is the Cock, and the other is the Dam: the Cocke flieth abroad to bring in, the Dam sitteth vpon the nest to keepe al at home. So God hath made the man to trauaile abroad, and the woman to keepe home: and so their nature, and their wit, and their strength are fitted accordingly; for the mans pleasure is most abroad, and the womans within.⁴⁴

Ariane Balizet explains this type of imagery in terms of the gendered bases of authority and place:

Whether the husband was away from home for the day or an extended period of time, a household maintained good governance based on an understanding of female domesticity as a natural, inherent trait, reflected within the animal world in a pair of birds tending their nest. While the husband’s authority is absolute inside the home, his *place* is in fact “abroad,” outside the home; a wife’s authority is limited to household labors and production, but her *place* is firmly located inside the home.⁴⁵