“A True Reporte”

News and the Neighbourhood in Early Modern Domestic Murder Texts

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A woman here lieth dedde on grounde,
 God knoweth here I dead have her found,
 Drawe nere and see her deadly wounde,
 Whiche grevous is to me:
 Beholde he saied, and cried faste,
 She is out of a windowe caste,
 The people then in all the haste,
 Drewe nere that facte to see.

D.S., *A True Reporte or Description of an Horrible, Wofull, and Moste Lamentable Murther* (London: Henry Kirkham, 1573), sig. A2^r.

The 1573 murder pamphlet *A True Reporte* opens with the narrator pamphleteer asleep in his bed on a windy night. He is woken by a cry from outside; his neighbour has discovered a woman lying dead in the street. Our narrator rises to view the gory sight, and finds that the corpse has been thrown from the window of a nearby house. It is soon decided by the assembled crowd that the wounds inflicted upon the body must be the work of the woman's husband, with whom she was seen, “merrie,” earlier that evening.¹ The narrator calls for the husband, but receiving no answer, bangs upon his door until he comes forth. Confronted with the body of his wife, and then taken to the sheriff, and finally to jail, the husband, John Kynnestar, confesses to the crime, a confession our narrator ventriloquizes. Kynnestar is judged guilty of the murder, and executed.

The nameless narrator is thus embroiled in the aftermath of domestic murder: he views the evidence of the crime, apprehends the criminal, and hears his confession. Yet there is no suggestion that he is a constable, or in any way affiliated with the law. His only role is that of neighbour. Through this role, he takes responsibility for setting in motion the legal processes of criminal justice.

1 D.S., *A True Reporte or Description of an Horrible, Wofull, and Moste Lamentable Murther* (London: Henry Kirkham, 1573), sig. A4^r.

This chapter traces the figurations of neighbourhood involvement in the detection of domestic crime, as represented in early modern news pamphlets and broadside ballads. I explore the extent to which household privacy is constructed as contingent upon legal and moral conformity; the circumstances in which communal surveillance is mandated as a neighbourhood responsibility; and the ways in which neighbours motivated by self-interest and prurient curiosity are assimilated into providential narratives. In so doing, I argue that these texts use the ideal of the scrutinizing neighbourhood to contain the disruptive potential inherent in disseminating news of domestic murder.

A *True Reporte* defines itself as a 'news' text, conveying details of a true, recent, and disturbing murder to the reading public. The title page gives the expected details of the crime, including the name of the criminal, his relationship to the victim, the city in which the crime occurred, and the relevant dates. Furthermore, it claims the pamphlet has been published within six months of both crime and execution, thus signalling the text's temporal proximity to the crime to the pamphlet's potential purchasers. The text is verified by both the reported experience of the narrator and a list of local witnesses who agree that "this is true."²

Named witnesses who can corroborate the pamphleteer's account commonly feature in murder pamphlets, for example, *The Manner of the Cruell Outragious Murther of William Storre* (1603) ends with four testimonies, each signed by many names, confirming the good character of the murdered man. Those pamphleteers who cannot claim personal knowledge of the crime signal their veracity through emphasizing aural and visual proximity to its consequences. Thomas Cooper describes himself as an "eare-witnesse" of a murder in Suffolk, having been present at the assize trial,³ whilst the author of *Newes Out of Germanie* is anxious to assure the reader that he "not only heard the murderers examination, but was also an eye witnesse of his death."⁴ In both cases, the pamphleteer establishes the 'truth' of his account not through evidence of the events themselves, but through the legal apparatus of condemnation and execution: he trusts his eyes and ears only so far as they relay the accounts and judgements of the trial.

In contrast, *A True Reporte* concerns itself with creating an atmosphere of verisimilitude and authenticity apart from the legal apparatus of the crime.

2 Ibid., sig. A1^v.

3 Thomas Cooper, *The Cry and Revenge of Blood Expressing the Nature and Haynousnesse of Wilfull Murther* (London: Nicholas Okes for John Wright, 1620), p. 3.

4 Anon., *Newes Out of Germanie, A Most Wonderfull and True Discourse of a Cruell Murderer* (Ipswich: George Pen, 1584), sig. A2^r.

Despite being presented within the paratexts of a news pamphlet, the text itself is closer in form to a broadside ballad; it is written in verse, and has an unnamed narrator who is a participant in the action rather than a mere observer. In claiming to relay the words – rendered in verse but recorded in substance – of witnesses and murderer in the immediate aftermath of the crime, this generically hybrid text provides an example of the ways in which news pamphlets legitimated their “true report[s]” not only through eyewitness accounts of executions and “eare-witnesse” reports of trials, but through recording the witnessing of the crime’s antecedents and aftermath by the neighbours of criminal and victim. The text proper maintains the conventions of early modern murder texts in recounting a bloody and disturbing murder within a narrative framework of detection, judgement, and punishment; a framework which relies upon the surveillance, witnessing, and shared responsibility of the surrounding neighbourhood.

In *The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat*, Peter Lake explores the extent to which murder pamphlets simultaneously induced disorder, through describing titillating acts of sex and violence, and “controlled and contained” these disorderly elements, in representing the trial, confession, and punishment of the criminal.⁵ He argues that the pamphlets derived their popularity both from their sensationalized accounts of disruptive behaviour, which enact communal fantasies of subversion and disobedience, and their containment of this behaviour within conventional narratives of state justice. The texts at once allow the reader to collude with forbidden behaviour, and to judge such behaviour from a safe and comfortable distance.

By examining the portrayal of neighbourhood surveillance in news pamphlets and ballads, this chapter explores the construction of neighbourhood as a moral force that complements the legal process of trial, confession, and punishment. In so doing, it suggests that the figure of the neighbour is aligned with that of the reader: encouraged at once vicariously to experience domestic disorder, and to judge it. Domestic crime violated the order of the household and the laws of the state, and thus justified opening up the private home to the public gaze of the community.

As Lena Cowen Orlin argues in *Locating Privacy in Tudor London*, there was little privacy in an early modern home: the social forces of “public policing” – in which the community provided a public moral system to complement private conscience – and neighbourly curiosity, often ended in the ecclesiastical courts, ensuring that the home remained subject to the communal and state

5 Peter Lake, with Michael Questier, *The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. xiv.

forces that surrounded it.⁶ The household only retained its private authority as long as it remained subject to public laws, moral as well as legal. Elizabeth Mazzola and Corrine S. Abate term early modern homes “arenas of surveillance,” both because those within the home could view those outside, and because those without could scrutinize the comings and goings of those within.⁷ Yet the phrase “arenas of surveillance” is misleading because it connotes an invasion of privacy that would be understood today as encroaching upon the freedom of the individual. As Cynthia Herrup argues, the nature of criminal law in the period rendered the “vigilance” of the neighbourhood, not an invasion of privacy, but “a communal obligation.”⁸ In early modern news pamphlets and ballads, this vigilant surveillance is represented as positive and necessary, sanctioned by law, and enabled by God.

“Cause people should her see”: Neighbourly Behaviour

A True Reporte depends upon both a neighbourhood witnessing discord in the liminal spaces of the home, and a narrator neighbour who detects domestic crime and brings the criminal to judgement. As a newsworthy murder account, it rests on the currency of the witnessing neighbours as a signifier of truth. Yet the narrative also depends upon the significance of the concept of neighbourhood for the criminal himself.

In this text, a marital murder takes place in a bedchamber of a house. The husband, John Kynnestar, murders his (unnamed) wife upon their bed, then throws her from the bed and attempts to sleep. Deciding that he is unable to do so, he casts the body of his wife from the window. Soon after, his neighbours knock at his door. Much of this appears surprising, even inexplicable. That Kynnestar, having spent a “merrie” evening with his wife, should hear the voice of the devil instructing him to stab her, and obey it, is never explained within the text. That Kynnestar should throw the corpse of his wife out of the window, without making any attempt to conceal it or dispose of it, is more unexpected still. Yet the reason that he gives for this is yet more surprising: “cause people

6 Lena Cowen Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 10.

7 Elizabeth Mazzola and Corrine S. Abate (eds.), *Privacy, Domesticity and Women in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), introduction, p. 4.

8 Cynthia B. Herrup, *The Common Peace: Participation and the Criminal Law in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 70.

should her see."⁹ Kynnestar defenestrates the body of his victim so that the surrounding community may bear witness to his crime.

Thus despite the fact that Kynnestar initially feels no sorrow at his crime, he is aware that his actions must have consequences. Yet he does not situate his act within the parameters of the legal system; it is the narrator, not the subject, of the text who forges a relationship, begun in the jail and ended at the gallows, between the criminal and the state. According to Kynnestar's interior logic, the crime has taken place within his home, and must therefore be of concern to the community. In finding it too dark to invite the community within his home to witness the evidence of his crime, to which the body of his wife has been reduced, he casts the evidence from his home, that his neighbours might view it in the public street. This suggests that the defenestration takes place at dawn, as the first public street-lamps were not installed in England until the 1680s; this timing would also explain the immediate response of the surrounding neighbourhood.¹⁰

The actions of all the supporting cast of D.S.'s text, as well as those of the narrator himself, reinforce and support the assumptions of Kynnestar. The cry that wakes the narrator is that of a neighbour on viewing the body; the cry is designed to wake him, to alert the whole neighbourhood. The narrator's neighbours together guess at the identity of the murderer, and all support the decision of the narrator to apprehend the murderer and gain his confession himself. Thus, whilst the trial and execution are the ultimate instruments of justice in the text, the discovery of the crime and the judgement of the murderer are represented as the province of his neighbours.

Neighbourhood was defined, as now, as a community living in close physical proximity; yet it could also be used as a mass noun describing neighbours (a sense now obsolete); as an abstract noun with an implied value judgement (as in "neighbourly behaviour"); or to refer to an abstract quality describing behaviour between neighbours, such as 'good' or 'ill' neighbourhood.¹¹ To live within a neighbourhood thus implied an expectation of a certain standard of behaviour towards that community, and created a particular bond between its members. In *A Briefe Discourse of Two Most Cruell and Bloudie Murthers*, a 1583 pamphlet detailing the murder of one neighbour by another, the anonymous author refers to the crime not as unlawful, but as unnatural, and compares it to the unnatural act of husband murder:

9 D.S., *A True Reporte*, sig. B1^r.

10 Roy Strong, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 126.

11 See the *OED*: "neighbourhood," 1a/2a; 4a; 6a; 6b.

Shall I not saye, the husband hath abridged the lyfe of his espoused Wife and mate, and she likewise committed the like unnaturall acte on her Husband? Hath not one brother murdered the other, one neighbour killed the other, one frend been false to the other, yea, & very nature turned agaynst it self?¹²

The legal and ecclesiastical bonds of marriage, the blood ties of fraternity, and the affection and trust implied by friendship, are each likened to the state of neighbourhood. Furthermore, in the same text, the murder of one neighbour by another is described as an “unneighbourlike deede,” suggesting that the inverse of this adjective, “neighbourlike,” is a positive qualifier used to describe support rather than murder, trust rather than betrayal.¹³

The ideal of good neighbourhood could imply imaginative, as well as literal, community. In *A Briefe Sonet Declaring the Lamentation of Beckles*, a ballad by Daniel Sterrie (who may be the “D. S.” who authored *A True Reporte*), the auditors (and readers) are referred to throughout as the personified town’s “neighbours,” and are requested to listen to the lament for this reason. The ballad begins: “My loving good neighbours, that comes to beholde, | Me sillie poore Beckles, in cares manifold.”¹⁴ Here, neighbourhood is a device to involve the audience in another town’s tragedy; as neighbours, auditors are invited to “beholde,” or bear witness to, the town’s troubles. In using the term to evoke solidarity and sympathy in strangers, Sterrie is echoing its use in the narrative of the Good Samaritan in the Geneva Bible: “Which nowe of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the theeves?”¹⁵

Yet even spiritual neighbourhood is rooted in the concept of shared responsibility implied by physical proximity, as demonstrated by the printed sermon *An Exposition upon the Prophet Jonah*, in which George Abbot frames the ideal of loving one’s neighbour in spatial terms:

Thou oughtest to love thy neighbour, but as thou lovest thy selfe. The example of thy charitie, is drawne from thy selfe at home.¹⁶

12 Anon., *A Briefe Discourse of Two Most Cruell and Bloudie Murthers* (London: Roger Warde, 1583), sig. A3^r.

13 Ibid., sig. B1^r.

14 Daniel Sterrie, *A Briefe Sonet Declaring the Lamentation of Beckles* (London: Robert Robinson, 1586), HEH Britwell 18342.

15 *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), Luke 10. 36.

16 George Abbot, *An Exposition upon the Prophet Jonah, Contained in Certaine Sermons Preached in S. Maries Church in Oxford* (London: Richard Field, 1600), p. 126.

The resonance of the spiritual application of this term is drawn from an appreciation of its concrete value; a sense that a neighbour, one who lives in the neighbourhood of one's own home, is as connected morally as spatially with the occurrences within that home. Thus the balladeer of Beckles attempts to draw his listeners into an imaginative community of neighbourhood precisely because physical neighbourhood is imbued with such significance.

Sterrie's ballad is not the only surviving ballad to recount the fire at Beckles. Thomas Deloney's *A Proper New Sonet Declaring the Lamentation of Beckles* appeared the same year, and was printed by the same printer. Yet whilst both ballads speak with the personified voice of the town, Deloney, rather than fashioning the audience into a community of sympathetic neighbours to Beckles, uses Beckles as his mouthpiece to condemn the practice of 'bad' neighbourhood, portraying neighbours who filch and steal "theyr neighbors wealth" in the aftermath of the fire, and describing the man who began the blaze as the "instrument" of God's "ire."¹⁷ Thus the inverse of 'good' neighbourhood, which detects crime through observing nearby households, is 'bad' neighbourhood, which commits crimes against those neighbours.

The Horrible Murther of a Young Boy: Tongueless Speech and Sexualized Curiosity

Whilst the outcomes of neighbourhood surveillance in domestic murder texts are invariably represented as positive, the motivations for this surveillance are not. Consider, for example, the murder pamphlet *The Horrible Murther of a Young Boy of Three Yeres of Age* (1606), in which an old Widow and her son attempt to murder two children – a little boy of less than three years of age, and his sister, of no more than four. The boy is drowned in a ditch, with a piece of wood tied to his back. The girl is forced to watch this, after which her tongue is cut out, and she is left up a tree, to perish. However, she is discovered by a passer-by, and after many weeks of begging on the streets of the town, she is able to alert the neighbourhood to the crimes of the widow, known locally as "Mother Dell," and her son.

The pamphlet opens by recording that the two children, in company with a pedlar and unknown woman, were seen to enter the house of Mother Dell by a tailor and "divers" others, but were not seen to leave it.¹⁸ The first reference to

17 Thomas Deloney, *A Proper New Sonet Declaring the Lamentation of Beckles* (London: Robert Robinson, 1586).

18 Anon., *The Horrible Murther of a Young Boy of Three Yeres of Age* (London: E. Allde, 1606), p. 1.

this sight is not one of concern for the circumstances of children, but one of anxiety about sexual disreputability: the “Children were led into the said house by a wandering Pedler & his wife (or Puncke.)” The narrator would seem to suggest that it is the potential relationship between the pedlar and the unknown woman that causes the observers to pause; they are anxious about the chastity and sexual status of the woman, not about the children accompanying her.

The use of “puncke” is similar to that of Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure*, believed to have been written shortly before the publication of this pamphlet: “she may be a punk, for many of them are neither maid, widow, nor wife.”¹⁹ It suggests a social anxiety, as well as a moral anxiety; a woman who cannot be defined in terms of marital status (due to her presumed unchastity) must be defined as a prostitute, and thus as an outsider. The bystanders here are, as Laura Gowing puts it, “maintaining and surveilling neighbourhood honesty”; Gowing argues that, for women, honesty constituted “sexual honesty.”²⁰ The tailor is the only one of those watching who takes note of the children, yet he is interested not in their welfare, but in their location, as they are wearing beautiful and fashionable clothes and he wishes to copy the patterns for his trade.

The neighbours, then, are represented as being motivated by both self-interest and a prurient curiosity; they are concerned with gaining knowledge and passing judgement for their own sakes, not for the sake of the community, the justice system, or the individual well-being of those they observe. Yet this does not prevent them from being instruments of good within the text. Indeed, they are portrayed as instruments of a providential God, who stage-manages the discovery of the murderers and miraculously grants speech to the tongueless child, that she might condemn her attackers. However, whilst God needs to intervene in causing the mutilated girl to speak, no such intervention is necessary in order to motivate the neighbours; self-interest is, initially, sufficient to incite their curiosity, although sympathy for the girl soon also plays a part. The motives behind neighbourly curiosity are neither interrogated nor judged; the curiosity itself is represented as a sufficient strategy of legal and moral surveillance.

It is the tailor who first links his observations of the house with wrongdoing. Having seen the children enter, but only the pedlar and his “puncke” exit, he goes to Mother Dell, the owner of the house, and questions her as to the whereabouts of the children. Whilst this does not itself lead to discovery of the

19 William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, v.i.178 in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).

20 Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 103, 52.

murderer, it is the first instance within the text of the house itself representing (and therefore revealing) the crimes of the murderers. First the entrances and exits of the pedlar and "puncke" cause the tailor to confront Mother Dell on her own doorstep; next the injured child herself recognizes the house, and cries out, a cry which "drew people about her."²¹ Then Mother Dell and her son appear at the door, and the child cries still louder, alerting the neighbours to wrongdoing. "Some of the Neighbours" then enter the house, without permission, leading the child with them.²²

The local Justice is convinced of the guilt of the murderers. However, they refuse to confess, and as the tongueless girl cannot speak her accusation, the Justice is unable to bring them to trial. He imprisons them until the next assizes, hoping that "God would in time make it yet more plaine then it was."²³ Soon after, God grants miraculous speech to the girl, and she is able to testify at the trial. Before the jury withdraw, they look inside the girl's mouth, but cannot see "so as much as the stumpe of a tongue therein."²⁴ Having witnessed proof of the God's providential interference, they find the murderers guilty.

This miraculous occurrence might seem out of place in a news pamphlet that purports to present a "true relation" of the crime.²⁵ Yet such occurrences are in fact characteristic of the genre. The majority of murder pamphlets represent neighbourhood detection and legal judgement as enabled through a Protestant, providential master-narrative in which an omniscient God interferes with the legal and local processes, providing clues, confessions, and the whereabouts of criminals. In *A Horrible Murther*, the providential device of tongueless speech intersects with neighbourhood surveillance and the child's cry on seeing the murderers' house, to bring about their apprehension.

In *Arden of Faversham* (1592), a play based upon the 1551 murder of a Kentish landowner by his wife and various accomplices, the blood of the murdered man "cleaveth" miraculously to the floor; it cannot be removed by scrubbing, and so becomes evidence of his murder.²⁶ This is a variation on cruentation, "the belief that the corpse of a murdered person would bleed anew in the presence of its murderer."²⁷ In James VI & I's *Daemonologie* (1597),

21 Anon., *Horrible Murther*, p. 5.

22 Ibid., p. 6.

23 Ibid., p. 7.

24 Ibid., p. 9.

25 Ibid., p. 1.

26 Anon., *Arden of Faversham*, ed. Martin White (London: A & C Black, 1982), xiv.251–256 and 399.

27 Erika T. Lin, *Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 143.

he claims that a corpse touched by the perpetrator “wil gush out of bloud, as if the blud wer crying to the heaven for revenge of the murtherer,” a “secret super-naturall signe” appointed by God.²⁸ This miraculous occurrence frequently occurs in news pamphlets, as in early modern judicial processes; as Malcolm Gaskill notes, cruentation not only “added dramatic tension to popular pamphlets,” but also “actually featured in trials.”²⁹

In *Arden*, the idea of cruentation is transfigured, as the house itself becomes allied with both murderer and victim, bearing witness to the guilt of the latter and the wounds of the former. Yet it is not necessary to the process of detection; the fatal entrance of the murdered man has already been witnessed by Arden’s neighbours.³⁰ Likewise, in *The Horrible Murther*, the mutilated child’s identification of the home with the criminal becomes an incident of miraculous speech, as the child’s wounded mouth that noisily but wordlessly implored the neighbourhood to grant her justice, is granted the ability to speak in order to bring about that justice. Yet the child’s presence in the courtroom, that she might miraculously testify, is dependent on neighbourhood surveillance.

It is significant that it is the sight of the house, not the criminals, that first causes the child to cry out in accusation; she identifies her attackers (and the murderers of her brother) with the house that contains them. This identification is reinforced by the logic of the narrative; the child’s wordless accusations are confirmed by the objects within the house as the home gives up its secrets. The God-given miracle of speech, which allows the child to testify against the murderers, is rendered practically unnecessary by the power of the home as both representation of the criminals, and revelatory scene of the crime. What makes this still more significant is that the crime in its entirety does not occur in the house; much of it takes place in the surrounding woods and fields. Yet the home is so much identified with its (criminal) owners that it becomes the revelatory site of their secrets, whether or not it has witnessed them.

Neighbourhood surveillance, then, is represented as legitimated by suspicion of misconduct, sexual or otherwise. However, neighbourhood interference requires not only suspicion, but also evidence. When the tailor and “divers” others suspect a link between the house and sexual immorality, it licenses them to knock upon the door and question the owners, but not to

28 James VI and I, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1597), p. 80.

29 Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 227.

30 For further discussion, see my article “‘Marrow-prying neighbours’: Staging Domestic Space and Neighbourhood Surveillance in *Arden of Faversham*”, *Cahiers Élisabéthains* (forthcoming: June/July 2015).

enter. When the child suggests a link between her wound and the house, it licenses the neighbours to approach the house; and when the child suggests a yet stronger link between her wounds and the owners of the house, it licenses them to enter. Transgression dissolves both the boundaries to private property, and the occupier's rights to protect those boundaries. The household only retains its private authority as long as it remains subject to public laws. Once these laws are suspected of having been broken, the house becomes open to the community; furthermore, the house is portrayed as legitimately betraying its inhabitants by giving up its secrets to those outside its walls.

"The Lorde will bring it out": Providential Detection

The reactions of the neighbourhood to crimes within that neighbourhood in *A Horrible Murther* are represented as legitimate, lawful, and sanctioned by God. The same is true of *The Truth of the Most Wicked and Secret Murthering of John Brewen* (1592), in which Anne Brewen murders her husband, John Brewen, at the behest of her lover, John Parker. She pledges herself initially to both men, and only marries Brewen after he has her arrested for refusing to return the jewels he gifted her on the understanding that they would marry. When she agrees to marry him, he drops all charges. However, Parker persuades her to refuse to share her husband's bed until he buys her a better house, and Anne moves to lodgings some distance away in order to be close to Parker. She then murders her husband.

The crime is discovered two years later, when Anne is overheard arguing about the crime with her lover: "These speeches thus spoken betweene them in vehemencie of spirite, was over heard of some that revealed it to the majestates."³¹ Anne is at this point pregnant with Parker's child, and attempts to persuade him to marry her. She strives to hide the pregnancy from her neighbours until the marriage takes place; indeed, she is so anxious to save her credit that she will not "goe forth of her doores for feare her neighbours should perceave her great bellie."³² Thus her neighbours overhear the above speeches when she is within her home; the early modern home again becomes an "arena

31 Anon, *The Trueth of the Most Wicked and Secret Murthering of John Brewen* (London: Edward White, 1592), p. 6. This pamphlet was attributed to Thomas Kyd by J.P. Collier, but that attribution is debated; see Arthur Freeman and Janet Ing Freeman, *John Payne Collier: Scholarship and Forgery in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 857–860.

32 Anon., *Murthering of John Brewen*, p. 5.

of surveillance,” where private speech may be overheard by those outside its walls.

The eavesdropping is here justified by what is overheard; the criminality of the speech allows the neighbours to report it rightfully to the magistrates. It is further justified by the moral the author draws from it: that “the Lorde will bring it out, for bloud is an unceassant crier in the eares of the Lord and he will not leave so vilde a thing unpunished.”³³ The act of eavesdropping is rendered providential, enabled by God and carried out through the curiosity of his instruments, and thus the motives of the neighbours become unimportant.

Providential interference is not confined to the processes of detection. *Sundrye Strange and Inhumaine Murthers, Lately Committed* (1591) recounts the murder of Master Page of Plymouth by his wife. The pamphleteer chronicles that on the night the murder takes place, and for three nights after, “an ugly thing formed like a Beare” is seen, carrying a linen cloth “representing the instruement wherewith the saide M. Page was murdered.”³⁴ A raven and a mysterious ship are also spotted. Each of these is characterized as a mysterious portent, which, whilst proven unnecessary in the discovery of the murder, manifests a divine concern that the crime be detected. The providential framework, then, can encompass miraculous events necessary to the detection of a crime, such as the speech of the tongueless child; miraculous portents which are not necessary, such as a bear-like creature carrying a murder weapon; and even crimes themselves, whether accidental or not, as in the case of the fire at Beckles. God’s instruments may be miraculous, human, or quasi-demonic, and his role may be detection, decoration, or even earthly punishment for earthly wrongs: the authors of news texts can use any or all of these models of providential interference to suit the purposes of their narratives.

Furthermore, the authors of domestic murder texts frequently emphasize the fact that human motives may be marshalled for divine purposes. In *The Most Wicked and Secret Murthering*, the curiosity of the neighbours, as Alice’s anxieties about the possible detection of her pregnancy make clear, is directed towards the sexual status of the woman in question, not towards the possibility of detecting a crime. It is her chastity with which they are concerned, and thus her sexual and social position, not her potential for criminality. It is only when directed by God that this prurient eavesdropping becomes an act of detection.

A similar act of overhearing takes place in *The Arraignment of Margaret Fern-seede* (1608), in which Margaret Fernseede, a former prostitute who runs

33 Ibid., p. 6.

34 Anon., *Sundrye Strange and Inhumaine Murthers, Lately Committed* (London: Thomas Scarlet, 1591), sig. B4^v.

a secret brothel within her marital home, stabs her husband to death. Her motive for the crime is her husband's discovery of her illicit activities: he overhears strange men speaking and coughing in the next room, and confronts his wife. Here, the act of eavesdropping precipitates one crime in revealing another; once Margaret Fernseede's role as a bawd has been discovered by her husband, she decides to murder him. Overhearing secrets that have penetrated walls proves for him to be fatal. Both accounts testify to the permeability of the early modern home; walls were thin, and whilst private spaces may have existed within the home, private conversations could not be guaranteed. Yet they also suggest the limits of neighbourly curiosity.

In both texts, as in *A Horrible Murther*, sexualized neighbourly curiosity is able to discover the crime, but it is entirely unable to prevent it. Anne Brewen is able to poison her husband gradually, over several days and nights, without the suspicion of her neighbours, despite the fact that she has not lodged with him since their wedding night, and is regularly visited by the man who was formerly her suitor. The existence of separate homes might be partially to blame for this; as she lives apart from her husband, the neighbours of her husband are not also her neighbours, and therefore cannot observe her behaviour outside his home. Yet there is also an essential misreading of the situation on the part of the neighbours:

No person as then suspecting any manner of evil done to him by his wife, but esteemed her a very honest woman, although through her youth, she knew not as then how to behave herself to her husband so kindly as she ought, which they imputed to her ignorance, rather then to any mallice conceived against her husband[.]³⁵

Likewise, two neighbours speak to Margaret Fernseede after the discovery of her husband's body, and infer from her callous reaction that she may have been responsible for his murder. However, despite the fact that Anthony Fernseede is "amongst his neighbours, reputed to be both sober and of verie good conversation," whilst Margaret commits acts of "publique and inrespective unchastitie," no neighbour informs Anthony of the fact prior to his demise. It is his own discovery of it that occasions his murder.³⁶ In the case of husband murder described in *A Briefe Discourse*, the neighbours do not suspect the planned crime, but they perceive "the common and dishonest behaviour of this wicked

35 Anon., *Murthering of John Brewen*, p. 5.

36 Anon., *The Araigement & Burning of Margaret Ferne-seede* (London: E. Allde, 1608), sig. A3^v.

women,” and talk of it so much that word comes “at last to her husbands eares,” and so helps bring about his death.³⁷ Thus there are limits to the potency of neighbourhood surveillance; it is a force for detection, not for prevention, and is motivated by prurient curiosity, not by concern. It is only wholly a force for good when rendered providential by God.

The Murder of William Storre: Neighbours, Writers, Readers

In *The Manner of the Cruell Outragious Murther of William Storre* (1603) a parish priest, William Storre, is stabbed in the street by Francis Cartwright, the son of a local lord. He later dies of his injuries. A passing maidservant witnesses the attack, and cries out, which causes Cartwright to flee. This brings “many of the neighbors” to the scene of the crime.³⁸ But they are so disturbed to see their near-dead minister bleeding heavily, that they run into the town, all variously yelling and crying “murder,” so that those who hear them do not understand what has occurred and toll the town bells, thinking there may have been a fire. It takes some time to alert the proper authorities, by which time the murderer has fled and is hiding in his father’s house. The concerned neighbours are here represented as obstructing the course of justice, rather than assisting it; furthermore, their actions reinforce the authority of the private householder, who is able to protect his murderous son within his home, rather than challenging this private authority as having been undone by the nature of the crime.

As in *A Proper New Sonnet*, the neighbours here do not demonstrate “good neighbourhood.” Rather, they are symptomatic of the dangers of living in close proximity with those who, unlike members of the household, have no vested interest in the success of the larger unit. Furthermore, just as the plundering of neighbourhood property only becomes possible in *A Proper New Sonnet* when the integrity of individual households, and thus the demarcation of property, is destroyed, so the obstruction of justice by bystanders in *The Manner of the Cruell Outragious Murder* is only possible because the crime scene is spatially unbounded.

The attack upon William Storre does not take place in a private residence, and it is the public nature of the crime, which cannot be contained within a single building or identified as the responsibility of a single householder, that produces the confused and potentially dangerous response amongst those

37 Anon., *A Briefe Discourse*, sig. B2^v.

38 Anon., *The Manner of the Cruell Outrageous Murder of William Storre* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1603), sig. A3^r.

who discover it. A similar reaction is evident in *A True Reporte*, prior to the moment when the home of the murdered woman – and thus the location of the murder and the identity of the murderer – is identified. By occurring in a public space that is ruled by no single, local authority, but only by the wider state, the stabbing of William Storre lessens the power of the neighbours to intervene.

Yet *The Manner of the Cruell Outragious Murther* is unusual, in that it not only portrays the reaction of a community to murder; it is itself a communal response to the murder, and a neighbourhood attempt to bring the murderer to justice. Rather than encasing the narrative of the murder within a textual framework of discovery, trial, and retribution, the text enacts the condemnation of the murderer by the community, and aims to influence public justice and thus bring about execution. It is at once 'news' and petition. The necessity for this stems from the position and power of the murderer; due to his father's wealth and influence, and a perceived lack of evidence (which the pamphlet argues can be contradicted by the testimony of witnesses), the justice system refused the case. Thus the four signed testimonies affixed to the pamphlet attest to the truth of the account and the character of the murdered man, and each is accompanied by names of those of similar position and walks of life: one signed by parishioners, one by preachers, one by knights and esquires, and one by bachelors and doctors of divinity from Oxford. The various neighbourhoods of which the murdered priest was part – physical, educational, and spiritual communities – attempt to enact the process of justice on his behalf. As in so many murder pamphlets, the testimonies are not signed by eyewitnesses to the murder or by auditors of the murderer's confession; they have heard the accounts of others and drawn their own conclusions.

The Manner of the Cruell Outragious Murther, therefore, is able to represent potentially dangerous and foolish mass responses to crime, precisely because it fashions itself as the opposite to the communal behaviour it narrates. William Storre's murder does not occur within a private residence, but it does occur within an identifiable neighbourhood. The murder of the priest is geographically situated within his own parish, and thus becomes the responsibility of his parishioners, who set themselves up as judges, independent of legal responsibility or authority bestowed by the state. In signing these testimonies, the representatives of William Storre's communities do not themselves attest that they have seen the crime, or the evidence of it; not even the narrator can claim this, and the discovery of the body in this case belongs to the nameless maid who neither adds her testimony nor her signature.

The pamphlet is keen to emphasize that whilst the murder took place outside, the actual death of the priest occurred a couple of days later, in the

private, enclosed space of his bedchamber. His injuries, received on the street, took many days to kill him, and thus his dying words were spoken from his bed. The narrator, invited into the bedchamber of the dying man, imaginatively extends this invitation to the geographical and spiritual communities of the victim, through representing both space and words in his account. The reader of the pamphlet, given access to the same narrative, to the same hearsay, and to the names and testimonies of the men who support its (reported) truth, is invited to do the same, and thus to participate, like the “neighbours” in Sterrie’s ballad, in a fictional community of readers and auditors, who may themselves discover, judge, and distribute the “truth” the text conveys.

Thus the representation of neighbourhood in news pamphlets relating domestic murders is at once a shared fantasy of a world in which crimes, through providence, law, and neighbourhood, are made manifest and known, and a pragmatic acceptance of the limits of neighbourly suspicion and interference. In a world in which conduct books, law treatises, and state-sanctioned homilies propagate the ideal of the home as both an Englishman’s castle and a self-contained system of government, neighbours can witness and judge, but cannot always intervene.³⁹ News pamphlets and ballads can emphasize their proximity to the workings of the legal system, to the witnesses who give their names and testimonies, and to the crime itself, but they cannot fully contain the disruptive potential of domestic murder. Yet in fashioning an imaginative community of omniscient readers and auditors, able to access clues, confessions, and the crime itself independently of the apparatus of law, these news texts allow their audiences to participate in the illusion of security created by a God-driven, legally sanctioned narrative of detection, punishment, and neighbourhood judgement.

39 William Lambard, *Eirenarcha: Or of the Office of the Justices of Peace in Two Bookes*, 2 vols (London: Newbery and Bynneman, 1581), vol. 1, p. 158.