CHAPTER 8

“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 wondre,
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.


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.

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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.”

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, 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.”  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.

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2 Ibid., sig. A1v.