

Iman Sheeha. *Household Servants in Early Modern Domestic Tragedy*. London: Routledge, 2020. Pp 264. Hardback £120. ISBN: 9780367503772. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003047940>.

Lauren Cantos
Queen Mary University of London

Iman Sheeha's *Household Servants in Early Modern Domestic Tragedy* argues that representations of servants in domestic tragedies were, like the actual experience of service, diverse. Sheeha contends that the early modern stage represented these relationships between servants and employers in all their complexities, rather than re-enacting a strictly hierarchical model of service. Sheeha notes that prior scholarship on domestic tragedies has tended to read these plays as a singular, and often didactic model, but *Household Servants* argues for a more nuanced analysis of the roles and agency of servants in these plays.

Scholarship on the ordinary early modern household has tended to view it as a space with porous boundaries and few private spaces — court records support this notion with the inclusion of neighbours' testimonies in various disputes, ranging from reputational defamation to marital contracts. Servants were clearly enmeshed too in the activities (and disputes) of their respective households, sharing the same household spaces with their employers. *Household Servants* thus offers a noteworthy intervention which considers the perspective of these servants.

Household Servants analyzes four plays where servants figure in the plot, which are (in order): *Arden of Faversham*, *A Warning for Fair Women*, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, and *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. In these plays, the servants are indeed consequential to the plot and affect the narrative in various ways. In accordance with Sheeha's argument, there is no simple obedience to one's employer here, but instead, the plays present a representation that is more complicated, and at times, individualistic.

The first chapter on *Arden of Faversham* considers the play's emphasis on household mismanagement by reading it alongside murder pamphlets about servants murdering their masters. In an interesting reading of one of the pamphlets, Sheeha calls attention to the accompanying woodcut of 'the porous house' (25–7) with the walls of the home blending in with the outside world, quite literally to aid the servants' in the murder of their master. This context sets up a strong analysis of *Arden* that focuses on the Ardens' questionable standing as morally upright employers. Sheeha writes: 'the perception of service as morally beneficial was closely connected with the early modern perception of the household as a

spiritual as well as an emotional and economic institution' (42). The book argues that household employers not living up to their expected roles is underscored as a recurrent preoccupation in these plays. Another interesting concern Sheeha raises is the relationships between women who are of dissimilar social statuses: the general anxieties expressed elsewhere in a variety of print about gossiping certainly support this argument.

The subsequent chapter on *A Warning for Fair Women* makes a similar argument about the disordered household, or poor household governance, and its implications for servants. It makes a significant connection about the advice in domestic guidebooks which actively discourage a familiar relationship between employers and servants, especially through the divulgence of personal matters, and the representation of this in drama. Sheeha uses the play to argue that Master Saunders's initial mistake of bestowing his servant with more authority than his wife acts as a primary driver of this poor household governance: this act 'creates an opening for the violation of the household' (93) that culminates in domestic murder. Sheeha argues that this misstep is furthered through the play's more obvious representation of the overly familiar service dynamics between Mistress Drury and her servant, Roger. The chapter is an interesting analysis about how seemingly minor acts of servants going beyond their roles can produce catastrophic outcomes.

The analysis of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* continues the theme of the mismanaged household, reflecting on the differences in the representation between the play and its correspondent 1605 murder pamphlet, *Two Most Vnnatural and Bloodie Murthers: The One by Maister Cauerley, a Yorkshire Gentleman*. Sheeha notes that the servants disapprovingly discuss the behaviour of their profligate master, arguing that the servants try to make a corrective approach to his running of the household into general ill repute. There is a sound point here about the play's almost obsession with the Husband being inadequate in his household role, one which the household servants feel compelled to intervene in. Drawing on domestic guidebook advice, Sheeha shows how sometimes a servant disobeying their master, contrary to common assumption, would be expected if their master was acting improperly.

The final chapter on *A Woman Killed with Kindness* suggests that the play deliberates where the moral guidance lies in the household. Although the play differs from the other plays analyzed in the book in its lack of household murder, Sheeha argues that it has similar concerns. This chapter contemplates the autonomy of the servants within the household and the troubles they might face if they alerted their employers to anything amiss, particularly a sensitive issue

like marital infidelity. There are some interesting parallels drawn between the way *A Woman Killed with Kindness* depicts Frankford and his servant, Nick, with the latter perhaps functioning more as the ideal household master (as well as the play's alternative husband). This aspect brings particular attention and censure to Frankford's actions, one that Sheeha argues is especially evident in the play's ending. The consideration of the agency of the servants presents an opportunity to have a more developed reading of the household dynamics at play.

The question of how we 'should' read domestic tragedies is one that previous scholars have grappled with. As *Household Servants* acknowledges, these plays probably lent themselves to multiple meanings — far from being strictly didactic or moralistic positionings in dramatic form. Despite the apparent interest in the period about a range of ideal household behaviours, as suggested by the sheer prevalence of domestic advice, this argument for a more nuanced reading is persuasive. As Sheeha constructively considers, after all, many of these plays' audiences were probably in service themselves. The selection of plays demonstrate that household servants too could be the moral guide, rather than idealizing the master or mistress of the household. The relationship between servants and their employers as explored on the early modern stage is significant in this light.

Household Servants in Early Modern Domestic Tragedy considers the portrayal of a moral righteousness across the household hierarchy, not just at the top of it. Sheeha accordingly uses examples of servants trying to uphold the hierarchy in different ways. This argument makes me wonder how such dynamics might play out in the context of the internal service hierarchy (beyond the servant/employer binary) too. Amongst the tensions Sheeha explores, the powerful dynamic between servants and their masters and mistresses who fail to morally instruct and guide remains a chief concern. *Household Servants* makes an intervention into an area of early modern drama that is often overlooked but as Sheeha points out, the reception of the audience, many of whom were probably in service roles, presents a very worthwhile consideration for our continued analysis and re-assessment of these plays.