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Shakespeare at Home: Decoding Home as a 'Phenomenon of Perception' in Shakespeare's Major Tragedies

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Houses for Tragedies, must be made for great personages, for that actions of louse, strange aduentures, and cruell murthers, (as you reade in ancient and modern Tragedies) happen always in the houses of great Lords, Dukes, Princes, and Kings. Therefore in such cases you must make none but stately houses.
– Sebastian Serlio, The First Booke of Architecture

ABSTRACT

For Shakespeare, home is always virtual, imagined, not based on exact observation and not represented realistically. Shakespeare invites his readers to form images and notions with regard to something not known with certainty. Home as an imagined place suggests mediation through perception. Places come into focus, but then seem to fade from the characters' consciousness. Shakespeare treats such imagined places as phenomena of perception, partially conceived and partially revealed.

This paper intends to explore the cultural connections pertaining to domestic life and tragedy in Shakespeare's major tragedies – *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In particular, the dramatic function of the dwelling places in the tragedies, and the extent to which Shakespeare intertwines home and perception are deciphered. In a broad sense, the paper concerns with the materiality of the house, the staging of place, and theatrical issues such as setting, scenery and spectacle, and how Shakespeare "imagines" home life, and explores mediated, inhabited space in the major tragedies.

King Lear and *Othello* foreground home as a site of strife, disruption and instability. The erasure and disappearance, rather than the mere "loss" of Lear's castle and home, become the central phenomena around which the experience of dwelling revolves. Lear's castle vanishes from the characters's consciousness, leading to an exploration of architectural space, such as Lear's castle and the houses of Goneril, Regan and Gloucester. In *Othello*, home engages three different living arrangements centred on ill-defined vast ancestral African landscapes of Othello's childhood and youth, Brabantio's palazzo in Venice, and Othello and Desdemona's state apartments at the mighty fortress of Cyprus. The notions of home in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* focus on embodied space. It is always an oriented space, exploring the concept of life as habit and the gaps, distortions and voids associated with the concepts of home. *Hamlet* explores the emplacement of body as a focal point for the discussion of sensory experience. Also, Shakespeare represents home as a place that the residents reimagine, inscribe and transform,

according to their own experiences and perceptions. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare addresses the seeming failure of architecture to provide shelter, establish boundaries, and separate inside from outside. Here, as in *Hamlet*, the emplacement of the body in architectural space becomes crucial to the representation of home life. In *Macbeth*, the house creates adjacency, juxtaposition, and contiguity. In this ambiguous boundary, domestic life abuts a fantastical, wild world.

KEYWORDS

Home; Perception; Shakespeare; Imagined Place; Phenomenon.

Introduction

Ideally, home offers shelter and protection, and as a centre of family life, it symbolizes security, continuity and stability. In contrast, *King Lear* and *Othello* foreground the place of residence as a site of strife, disruption and instability. In *King Lear*, various types of discontinuities – emplacement and placelessness, and sequential discontinuities – produce vast expanses of space and voids that cannot be adequately filled. The erasure and disappearance, rather than the mere "loss" of Lear's castle and home, become the central phenomena around which the experience of dwelling revolves. Lear's castle vanishes from the character's consciousness, leading to an exploration of architectural space, such as Lear's castle and the houses of Goneril, Regan and Gloucester. The first scene of Act I takes place where Lear dwells and holds his court, presumably his own castle or palace. By the end of this scene, Lear's dwelling place and seat of government mysteriously and inexplicably seem to vanish into thin air. From that moment, the action takes place in various other locations such as Gloucester's house, Goneril and Albany's castle, a hovel and the outdoors. Lear loses ownership of and by extension access to his properties. Lear's former abode thus becomes an "empty space." In this play, changes in early modern housing conditions intersect experiential discontinuity, habits of old age, a crisis of authority and the disruption of patriarchal power.

Mazzola and Abate argue that in this play, "the household is attacked from within and from without," and that "the reach of female interests and their fierce opposition to both the home and the state" seem "most horrifying, most inexplicable" (1). Goneril and Regan, in their own different ways, try to modify, redefine, or bring to an end the tyrannical patriarchal regime associated with their father and centred in his vanished castle. Within their homes, both Goneril and Regan work towards an alternative worldview, which is dramatized as a fight over the control of domestic space. Goneril's house serves not only to "refine human feeling and perception" but also emerges as the pivotal feminine-gendered place of Goneril's will in counterpoise to Lear's masculine-gendered royal palace of the first scene. Regan's house serves as an important symbolic function in the play. Lear's intention to go to her house, and Edgar's apparent plot against her father bring about a double crisis. Therefore, most of the characters convene under Gloucester's roof. The house of Gloucester and the castle of Regan and Cornwall are symbolically, politically and even sexually connected, when Regan decides to marry her lover Edmund. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about Regan's house without mentioning the Gloucester's. Cornwall and Regan leave behind a locked empty house, an image with which they become increasingly associated. After Lear's, theirs is the second house that is emptied out and kept out of sight. Regan suggests that, having heard of Goneril's troubles with Lear, she and Cornwall decided to abandon their house, so that if Lear and his retinue "come to sojourn at my house, /I'll not be there"

(2.1.103-4). The evasive action that Regan and Cornwall took to avoid receiving Lear, the castle or house in Cornwall, like Lear's castle, fades from the characters's consciousness. Once again, disrupted and uprooted, another group has to abandon their house and seek refuge somewhere else.

As a symbolic substitute for Lear's, Gloucester's house is the stage upon which various conflicts play out. Regan's confrontation with Lear and the conflict between Kent and Oswald remains to be resolved in Gloucester's house. Gloucester's house thus becomes a symbol for the radical reshuffling of the social order of the play. Here, various characters re-imagine fundamental social and cultural relations. As Catherine Richardson remarks, writers of the period often use images of the house to embody and describe the house, "merging the categories of 'body' and 'house' in peculiar ways" (45). The collapse of the old order associated with Lear's or Gloucester's house makes room for new visions of the house and household relations, especially as conceived by Goneril and Regan. It also lays bare the vast expanses of Lear's kingdom.

In *King Lear*, hovel serves as a temporary, intermediary habitation before Lear and others are thrust into the vast empty countryside. Gaston Bachelard in Poetics of Space notes that even a hut embodies "the house's powers of protection against the forces that besiege it" (37). In Act III, house and hovel trade and invert functions. The house, transformed by the cruel and harsh guests who take it over, becomes, in Kent's description, the "hard house, harder than the stones whereof 'tis raised" (3.1.63-4). The hovel enters the characters's consciousness when Kent promises bareheaded Lear, nursing "heart-struck injuries" (3.1.17): "Gracious my lord, hard by here is a hovel; / Some friendship will it lend you against the tempest" (3.2.61-2). The house, despite its stone walls and heavy doors and gates, offers no security; whereas the hovel, lacking proper doors and walls, feels safe and welcoming. One represents the dangers of human cruelty; the other, warmth, safety, and protection from the "tyranny of the open night" (3.4.2). That Lear reaches the hovel after a series of mental and physical tortures and consequently his total renunciation, though an imposed one, is indeed thought-provoking.

In "Travelling Cultures," James Clifford proposes a view of culture based on opposing yet interconnected concepts of dwelling and travelling, "roots" and "routes." He argues for:

> a comparative cultural studies approach to specific histories, tactics, every day practices of dwelling and travelling: travelling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-travelling (36)

In *Othello*, Shakespeare juxtaposes two ways of life: the European, sedentary, urban, home-centered, represented by Venice, centered on Brabantio's house; and the other, North African, nomadic, centred on mobile, non-permanent dwelling, on what Othello himself refers to as his "unhoused" condition of lifelong wandering. Therefore, the former equates with European concepts of home life, household, hospitality, while the other equates with ever-shifting, self-erasing images of exotic places, improbable experiences and vague localities. The image of the dark, empty house looms large in Othello, as does the pervasive nature of darkness, which blurs boundaries and redefines the perception of architectural space. This, in turn, reveals assumptions about racial attitudes.

Home engages three different living arrangements centred on ill-defined vast ancestral African landscapes of Othello's childhood and youth, Brabantio's palazzo in Venice, and Othello and Desdemona's state apartments at the mighty fortress of

Cyprus. Throughout the play, Shakespeare obscures Othello's birthplace rather than clarifying it. In referring to his origins, Othello relies upon a storehouse of widespread popular images and beliefs about Africa, rather than recollections of identifiable locations. When Desdemona tries to encounter Emilia's remark about the extreme nature of Othello's jealousy, she cannot name Othello's homeland. She says, "I think the sun where he was born/Drew all such humors from him" (3.4.30-31). The handkerchief, apparently the only artefact connecting Othello to his home, is, as he says, a fantastical talisman that "an Egyptian" gave his mother, and "an antique token/My father gave my mother" (5.2.216-17). "Egyptian," according to Sousa, refers to "Gypsy" and thus the rootlessness lies at the margin of the cloth (140).

Based on Othello's account of events, Brabantio's house seems to have represented stability and continuity, and to fit almost perfectly the definition of the ideal home. In its warmth, stability, hospitality and domestic life, Brabantio's house has come as close to a home as anything that Othello had ever experienced. Brabantio's home seems like a peaceful retreat from the trials, tribulations, deprivation and temptations of life on the go. The house may have a sturdy foundation, and may have seemed like a welcome refuge. However, ultimately it offers but an illusion of stability. At the beginning of the play, the house, enveloped in thick darkness, seem utterly empty because one of the dwellers, Desdemona, has already eloped with Othello. She leaves behind a yet-to-be discovered empty bedchamber, a broken family and a deeply hurt and disappointed father. Othello and Desdemona's castle in Cyprus, however, offers an illusion of stability. The castle cannot withstand the storm that lies ahead. Montano and the gentlemen suggest that a fierce storm can shake a strong foundation and batter even a well-built fortification. This, however, points to Iago's malice that undermines and destroys the foundation of Othello and Desdemona's marriage. Home in Othello provides but an illusion of stability inasmuch as the "reality" or "psychology" of the house can be constantly reimagined, and relocated along the imaginative and emotional spectrum of human experience.

The notions of home in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* focus on embodied space. It is always an oriented space, exploring the concept of life as habit and the gaps, distortions and voids associated with the concepts of home. *Hamlet* explores the emplacement of body as a focal point for the discussion of sensory experience. Hamlet's return to Elsinore for his father's funeral opens a vast chasm in his concept of home. Hamlet deploys his own emotional history of pain in order to counter his uncle's powerful and seductive politics of pleasure.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare represents home as a place that the residents reimagine, inscribe and transform, according to their own experiences and perceptions. When Hamlet asks Ophelia where her father is, she does not vacillate in her response, "At home, my lord" (3.1.151). She knows that Polonius and Claudius, from a hiding place nearby, are listening to the conversation. Although the characters' precise living accommodations in Elsinore remain undisclosed, Hamlet implies, at least on the level of metaphor, that Polonius and his family reside in a house: "Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house" (3.1.132–3). The passage, rather cruelly, recommends that Polonius be locked up in a house with those who abuse, torment, mock, or make a fool of him. Elsewhere in the play, "home" also occurs in the context of a "return" to one's dwelling-place or country. Claudius welcomes Voltemand and Cornelius home from Norway and also explains his intentions to Laertes: "Hamlet returned

shall know you are come home" (4.7.130–31).

Hamlet dramatizes various homecomings. Hamlet and Laertes return home for a royal funeral, a coronation, and a royal wedding. As a ghost, old Hamlet, breaching the barriers of nature, makes a comeback, first dressed in full armour on the battlements and later dressed in a nightgown in Gertrude's closet. Hamlet, escorted to England, manages to escape certain execution and returns home. After Polonius's death, Laertes returns from France once again, this time to triumphal cheers of the common people who would like to see him crowned king. Fortinbras, on his voyage of return to Norway in Act V, chances upon the ruins of the Danish court and claims his "rights of memory" to the Danish throne.

Throughout the play, Shakespeare connects and intertwines house and body, a physical place of dwelling and a space transformed and reimagined through individual perception and experience. This meaning occurs metaphorically in Act III, scenes 3 and 4, which George Hibbard considers to be "the centre of the play's action" and "its emotional centre," respectively. Polonius hopes that in her closet Gertrude will "tax [Hamlet] home" (3.3.29) or "lay home to him" (3.4.1). "Home," in adverbial usage, here means to the very heart, deeply, intimately, poignantly. Either in relation to physical action or in a figurative sense, to tax or lay home involves an attempt to reach, touch, penetrate, or affect intimately, closely, and directly. The emplacement of the body serves as a focal point for gauging perception of home, as a physical space, and of domestic life. Hamlet's homecoming reveals that a barrier has been breached between mourning and celebration, occasions that normally require opposing emotional responses. Hamlet takes it upon himself to erect a barrier between his uncle and mother's pursuit of pleasure and his own intense suffering. In *Hamlet*, home provides no escape, even when mysterious portals open onto worlds unknown. Hamlet seeks to erect boundaries in his father's former house, yet seemingly unable to rebuild and restore walls his uncle and his mother have taken down.

Home is directly associated with architecture and habits of everyday living, symbolizing adjacency, thereby adjoining opposite ways of life, values and goals. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare addresses the seeming failure of architecture to provide shelter, establish boundaries, and separate inside from outside. Here, as in *Hamlet*, the emplacement of the body in architectural space becomes crucial to the representation of home life. In *Macbeth*, the house creates adjacency, juxtaposition, and contiguity. In this ambiguous boundary, domestic life abuts a fantastical, wild world.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare represents mobility in a much more sinister way. After the murder of Duncan, the Macbeths abandon the stability represented by their home at Inverness and adopt the restlessness and mobility of the Scottish kings. Their tragedy occurs in three home spaces, representing different domestic arrangements at Inverness, Forres, and Dunsinane—the first two of which they seemingly abandon. Each castle represents a stage in their domestic life. Inverness symbolizes a marital partnership dominated by Lady Macbeth, leading to a violation of rules of hospitality and a domestic space transformed into a murder scene. At Forres, Macbeth asserts his independence. Although Lady Macbeth remains involved in domestic life and management of the house, she oversees the banquet and looks after Macbeth's wellbeing, and becomes increasingly displaced. Macbeth, however, asserts his dominance as king and commissions the murder of Banquo. Dunsinane reveals nothing but the spectre of their former domestic life. In different ways, the Macbeths ruin three places of residence.

The Macbeths contaminate or pollute Inverness; they leave Forres haunted; and they empty out Dunsinane. Ironically, as they move from castle to castle, they find themselves more and more confined.

The castle at Inverness enters the audience's consciousness as the Macbeths' home and the centre of their domestic life. Immediately after making Malcolm Prince of Cumberland, Duncan first mentions Macbeth's home when he announces that he wishes to visit Macbeth's castle at Inverness and therefore "bind us further to you" (1.4.442–3). The Macbeths' move to the royal house at Forres offers new opportunities for a fresh start, but it also leaves behind a gruesome crime scene and an emptied-out castle, which had served as their home. In *Macbeth*, Forres contrasts with Inverness in significant ways. Until contaminated by the regicide, Inverness conveys a sense of intimacy, especially emphasized with references to bedchambers and areas out of public view. Even the more public great hall, where the Macbeths host a banquet for their royal guest and his entourage, remains offstage. Therefore, the action of the play emphasizes behind-the-scenes conversations and secret preparations for the assassination of Duncan. Forres, however, affords a more public setting, the action revolving around the banquet hall, where Macbeth and Lady Macbeth discharge their duties as royal hosts at a banquet. But even here, Macbeth finds time to privately confer with the murderers of Banquo. The scenes set in Forres, which span over much of Act III, intertwine the royal banquet and Banquo's murder. In Act III, Macbeth takes the lead as protector of the new home. In the process, he keeps Lady Macbeth largely in the dark about his plan for the murder of Banquo and later of Macduff.

Repeatedly, Macbeth proves himself the destroyer rather than protector of domestic space. In comparison to his previous residences, Macbeth uses Dunsinane more like a watchtower in a fortification than a home. Dunsinane simultaneously serves as refuge and prison. Macbeth finds a strange sense of security in the palace. Unable or unwilling to leave the fortress, he cannot rest or enjoy comfort therein. The interior space of his mind and heart reflects his surroundings. When Malcolm orders that each soldier cut down a bough from Birnam Wood and bear the branch in his hand, he not only makes the second prophecy come true but also symbolically returns life to the desiccated, hollowed out, and withered world that the Macbeths have created for themselves.

Shakespeare's treatment of home as a virtual and imagined space approximates to Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" which describes places and spaces of "otherness" that are simultaneously physical as well as mental. In Foucalt's words, heterotopias are:

[r]eal places – that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (3-4)

Home in the four major tragedies, as earlier established, is something that has been perceived, a space that has more layers of meaning or relationships to other places than being a mere physical entity. In precise, home in Shakespeare's major tragedies is a trans-place, a physical representation of a parallel space.

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