

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Stories Between Storeys: The Uses of Stairs to Gain Domestic Control

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‘It was an old fault’, observes the seventeenth-century architectural critic Roger North, ‘to spread the housing too much’, but within his lifetime the construction of buildings in England had reached the point of ‘such compaction, that an house is lay’d on an heap like a wasps-nest’.¹ North’s observation provides an insight into the redesign of domestic properties that occurred throughout the early modern period: the sprawling layout that was characteristic of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – as ‘done in my father’s house’, writes North – had been replaced at his time of writing in the 1690s by a residential style that championed height thanks to an increased number of storeys.² North’s comment offers a glimpse of the cultural response to this vertical growth spurt. He laments that the smells and sounds created by the multiple inhabitants of these taller dwellings ‘are a nuisance to all the rooms’, concluding that the house ‘is more offensive in a pile’.³ His choice of simile, comparing these heaped homes to wasps’ nests, suggests that offensive architecture produces equally offensive behaviour from its human swarms. North hints at a distinctly claustrophobic anxiety felt by the houses’ inhabitants, resulting from the necessary travel between and around these newly inserted storeys – a flight concretised in the flight of stairs.

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¹ Roger North, ‘An account of the Severall Modes of Houses’ in *Of Building: Roger North’s Writings on Architecture*, ed. by Howard Colvin and John Newman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 64–88 (pp. 68–9).

² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Despite featuring in the country's oldest castles, indoor staircases gradually became a ubiquitous feature in English homes across society as the early modern period progressed.⁴ John Schofield argues that evidence for domestic stairs in London 'is rare before the fifteenth century',⁵ yet by 1600 the low-lying stone dwellings of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had 'almost disappeared', having been replaced by houses with more than one storey.⁶ By the time of the Great Fire in 1666, Timothy Mowl notes, many London dwellings were 'timber-framed giants, five or even six storeys high' and were occupied by diverse members of society.⁷ These architectural developments necessitated the insertion of fixed staircases and were not restricted to the capital.⁸ Between 1570 and 1640 there had been a housing revolution across England, as W.G. Hoskins theorises, the 'Great Rebuilding', whereby rural houses were erected with 'two floors instead of one'.⁹ Fifteenth-century hall houses in the south-west of England were modernised by implementing a ceiling, which 'necessitated in turn the making of a staircase leading to the bedrooms [above]', both being significant structural alterations.¹⁰ Probate inventories dating from the end of the seventeenth century suggest that two storeyed houses with stairs were common in the town of Lowestoft, Suffolk.¹¹ Only one house with a second storey is listed in R.K. Field's survey of Worcestershire peasant buildings before 1500,¹² yet from the 1650s onwards wills from Wigston, Leicestershire reveal the regular appearance of permanent staircases in farmhouses,¹³ supporting Alan Dyer's claim that

⁴ Lise Hull, *Understanding the Castle Ruins of England and Wales: How to Interpret the History and Meaning of Masonry and Earthworks* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009), pp. 90-105.

⁵ John Schofield, *Medieval London Houses* (New Haven; London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1994), p. 82.

⁶ John Schofield, *London, 1100–1600: The Archaeology of a Capital City* (Sheffield; Oakville: Equinox Publishing, 2011), p. 70. He makes a similar assertion in Schofield, 'The Topography and Buildings of London, ca. 1600', in *Material London, ca. 1600*, ed. by Lena Cowen Orlin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), pp. 296-321 (p. 310).

⁷ Timothy Mowl, *Elizabethan and Jacobean Style* (London: Phaidon, 1993), p. 46.

⁸ Colin Platt, *The Great Rebuildings of Tudor and Stuart England: Revolutions in Architectural Taste* (London: UCL Press, 1994), p. vii; M. W. Barley, 'Rural Housing in England', in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales: Volume IV, 1500-1640*, ed. by Joan Thirsk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 696-766 (pp. 764-5).

⁹ W. G. Hoskins, 'The Rebuilding of Rural England, 1570–1640', *Past and Present* 4 (1953), 44-59 (p. 54).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹¹ David Butcher, *Lowestoft, 1550–1750: Development and Change in a Suffolk Coastal Town* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 314-15; R. W. Brunskill, *Vernacular Architecture: An Illustrated Handbook* (London: Faber, 2000), pp.104-5.

¹² R. K. Field, 'Worcestershire Peasant Buildings, Household Goods and Farming Equipment in the Later Middle Ages', *Medieval Archaeology* 9 (1965), 105-45 (p. 127).

¹³ W.G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (London: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 290-1.

single-storey medieval houses had ‘virtually disappeared’ in Midlands towns by 1700.¹⁴ Similarly, Chris King argues that Norwich’s ‘Great Rebuilding’ resulted in some single-story buildings with clay walls being replaced by ‘two-storeyed houses with flint-and-brick rubble foundations [...] and newel staircases’ to cater for the increasing urban population.¹⁵ As North observed, widespread architectural advancements throughout the early modern period meant that more people across England lived in multi-storey properties ‘lay’d on an heap’ thanks to the insertion of stairs.¹⁶

The surveys made by Ralph Treswell between 1585 and 1614 illustrate how common it had become for homes to accommodate the fixed architectural feature. In his 1612 drawing of the Clothworkers’ Company properties on West Smithfield and Cow Lane in London, every house has at least one set of stairs. Some have more than one flight: there are eleven outdoor steps leading to rooms above and twelve of the nineteen houses have stairs to ‘a seller’ below, while some residents who own adjoining shopfronts possess two sets of indoor stairs.¹⁷ As Treswell’s plan of the Christ’s Hospital properties on Giltspur Street and Cock Lane dating from before 1611 indicates, even smaller dwellings with inexpensive rent have stairs.¹⁸ The tenancy of Margaret Gryffin has ‘3 romes one over the other’, storeys that are accessed by an indoor newel stair. Next door, Andrew Davy leases two rooms on the ground floor each with ‘a Chamb over’, accessed by a newel in the corner of the larger downstairs room.¹⁹ The surveys reveal that newel stairs in an external projection were becoming increasingly rare. Instead, internal stairs are pervasive and even though straight flights are beginning to appear, timber framed newels in household rooms are by far the most typical.²⁰

This escalation in the number of properties with stairs did not mean that each tenant in a house of multiple occupancy had their own set. In 1637 parish officers describe a property within a messuage that was formerly the Prince’s Wardrobe in the London parish of St Martin Pomary. A door from the street leads to one set of stairs that are used by all lodgers

¹⁴ Alan Dyer, ‘Urban housing: a documentary study of four Midland towns 1530–1700’, *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 15 (1981), 207-18 (p. 209).

¹⁵ Chris King, “‘Closure’ and the urban Great Rebuilding in early modern Norwich”, *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 44 (2010), 54-80 (p. 62).

¹⁶ North, pp. 68-9.

¹⁷ *The London Surveys of Ralph Treswell*, ed. by John Schofield (London: London Topographical Society, 1987), pp. 132-4.

¹⁸ For more on Christ’s Hospital’s property revenue, see Carol Kazmierczak Manzione, *Christ’s Hospital of London, 1552–1598: ‘A Passing Deed of Pity’* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press; London: Associated University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 77-95.

¹⁹ *London Surveys*, pp. 85-7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

to reach the first floor. Then four more storeys – accessed by three more flights of stairs – comprise rooms that are inhabited by ‘John Holmes [...]; Smythe and his family; William Drywood with his wife and maid [...]; Widow Hurlstone, who was Drywood’s tenant; Widow Hawes, Widow Dixson, and Widow Wetnall, “three ancient widows and parishioners”; and Magdalen Hall, milkwoman, also an ancient parishioner’.²¹ A ‘marked characteristic’ of working- and middle-class residential dwellings in the seventeenth century was their ‘small footprint and multiple stor[ey]s’, Schofield affirms.²² A minimum of eleven tenants were spread over four storeys, exemplifying how different kinds of people were using the same stairs within a single building. Many scholars over the last sixty years have agreed with Hoskins’s generalisation that the ‘Great Rebuilding’ of houses resulted in ‘more rooms devoted to specialised uses’ that created ‘more privacy’.²³ Certainly, some of these architectural changes sought to increase personal privacy through the construction of closets, for example, where attempts were made to reduce and police access.²⁴ But as North’s *heaped wasps’ nests* suggests, enlarged and subdivided domestic spaces were not necessarily more private. The principal means of doing this – by building multiple storeys and connecting them with stairs – instead created an architectural structure that was itself a more public space shared between the different members of the household.

The variety of ways that stairs were used during the early modern period is a topic that has been neglected since North’s comments. Over one hundred years ago Walter Godfrey produced what is still the only lengthy study on English stairs. But his technical architectural focus and broad temporal span from the medieval period to the eighteenth

²¹ Derek Keene and Vanessa Harding, *Historical Gazetteer of London Before the Great Fire: Volume 1, Cheapside* (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, 1987), pp. 159-68.

²² Schofield, ‘The Topography’, p. 293.

²³ Hoskins, ‘The Rebuilding’, pp. 54-5. Alice T. Friedman affirms that a ‘desire for greater privacy was the motive’ of the ‘Great Rebuilding’ in her study of Wollaton Hall. Orest Ranum reinstates that the motivation behind the increasingly subdivided domestic spaces was ‘refuges of intimacy’. Lawrence Stone argues that smaller and more diversified rooms offered an ‘escape from the prying eyes and ears’ of the rest of the household. See Friedman, *House and Household in Elizabethan England: Wollaton Hall and the Willoughby Family* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 165; Ranum, ‘The refuges of intimacy’, in *A History of Private Life, Volume III: Passions of the Renaissance*, ed. by Roger Chartier, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 207-63; Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 254.

²⁴ Much scholarship exists on this topic. See for example Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1997); Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 125-7; Ranum, pp. 225-9; Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 188.

century mean that a detailed study of stairs in the early modern period in particular, not to mention the uses of stairs, is still wanting.²⁵ A more recent wave of publications, firmly rooted in the discipline of architecture, provides an abundance of technical facts on the types of staircase and their structural details but offers little insight into the practices beyond construction.²⁶ The few studies that focus on stairs from the discipline of art and design are, predominantly, general works that celebrate global wonders but lack detailed historical information.²⁷ Studies by archaeologists have perhaps come closest to thinking about the ‘way that contemporary people moved about’ early modern domestic spaces by plotting access routes around buildings and mapping trajectories inside suites of rooms using space syntax, although these are limited to charting possible movements of hypothetical people rather than investigating particular historical experiences.²⁸

I build upon these scholarly foundations by exploring narratives that were produced on, about and as a result of the uses of domestic stairs, investigating the stories that occurred between storeys. I consider how working- and middle-class people commonly shared their homes as husbands and wives, families, lovers, lodgers and landlords, and neighbours, to best understand how different social swarms lived within their heaped nests. Stairs gained cultural capital over the period, becoming structures with powerful associations where power was often exercised by their multiple users who sought to gain control over the home and its inhabitants. Early modern attitudes towards and actions upon this unpredictable domestic space were recorded in a huge variety of written documents, from inventories and court depositions to diaries, plays and works of prose. Taking inspiration from recent studies on external thresholds, such as Laura Gowing’s scholarship on windows and doors and Dave Postles’s study on church porches, I explore how stairs were a pertinently liminal ‘micro-space’ that hosted key cultural negotiations and advance this burgeoning field by considering how the household’s internal boundaries were also ‘embedded in the community’ and ‘were often permeable and

²⁵ Walter H. Godfrey, *The English Staircase: An Historical Account of its Characteristic Types to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1911).

²⁶ N. W. Alcock and Linda Hall, *Fixtures and Fittings in Dated Houses 1567–1763* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 1994), pp. 1-13; *Staircases: History, Repair and Conservation*, ed. by James W. P. Campbell and Michael Tutton (London: Routledge, 2014); Karl Habermann, *Staircases: Design and Construction* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2003); Alan Blanc, *Stairs, Steps and Ramps* (Oxford: Butterworth Architecture, 1996); John Templer, *The Staircase: Studies of Hazards, Falls, and Safer Design* (Cambridge; London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992).

²⁷ Catherine Slessor, *Contemporary Staircases* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2000); Eva Jiricna, *Staircases* (London: Laurence King, 2001).

²⁸ Amanda Richardson, ‘Corridors of power: A case study in access analysis from medieval England’, *Antiquity* 77 (2003), 373-84 (p. 374); King, “‘Closure’ and the urban”, 54-80.

insecure'.²⁹ I focus on the different issues that were formed and informed by the presence of stairs and assess the multiple ways in which these marginal yet meaningful structures were used in early modern homes, considering those who were thrown downstairs or forced up them, people who waited or met upon the stairs, and the perpetrators of these acts. Stairs, in their very nature, invite use. Yet the events and encounters that took place on the stairs were far from predictable largely due, as I argue, to the power exerted upon it by multiple users. My essay revolves around and amplifies the notion, incipient in North's words, that the abundance of stairs in the early modern period created an interactive arena of heightened and historically noteworthy social tension.

Husbands and Wives

The early modern home was founded on marriage and household stairs provided the architectural foundations upon which spouses pursued power. In his 1637 prose work *A Curtaine Lecture*, Thomas Heywood encourages husbands to revolt against their 'curst shrew' wives by supplying male readers with ways to control her body and 'master her tongue'.³⁰ The author suggests a strategy for domestic domination in the form of an anecdote, which begins as a married couple 'fel to dance'.³¹ Such a moment of intimacy demands that husbands 'take the women in their armes, and lift them up from the ground', for better or for worse.³²

[T]urning round with her till hee came to the top of the staires, and then letting her fall headlong, she tumbled downe to the bottome, and great odds she had not broke her neck; and this hee did laughing. But such was her good fortune that shee was onely bruised, as hee had before been [verbally] beaten; and finding it no advantage for her further to contend with him, shee submitted her selfe, and hee accepted of her submission; which on both sides was so unfainedly done, that they lived in great unity and love all the rest of their life after.³³

²⁹ Laura Gowing, "'The freedom of the streets': women and social space, 1560–1640", in *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*, ed. by Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 130–51 (p. 134); Dave Postles, 'Micro-spaces: church porches in pre-modern England', *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 (2007), 749–69.

³⁰ Thomas Heywood, *A Curtaine Lecture* (London: Robert Young, 1637), p. 205.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 208.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 208–9.

Malicious intent makes stairs a perilous place in shared homes. The male character seeks to smother the communicative and corporeal freedoms of his wife with a disguised embrace, to 'lift [her] up' physically and mentally before gleefully 'letting her fall headlong' into marital submission.³⁴ Recognising that her husband's physical strength is more than a match for her verbal berating, the wife relinquishes domestic control.

Neither the location nor the form of Heywood's attack is an accident. Using stairs as a weapon against women is a common motif in literature from the end of the sixteenth century onwards, but unlike Heywood's narrative they did not always result in 'great unity and love' between spouses, nor did they leave victims 'onley bruised'.³⁵ In Thomas Middleton's 1608 play *A Yorkshire Tragedy* the murderous master throws a maidservant 'tumble, tumble, headlong' down the stairs.³⁶ In Thomas Nashe's 1594 prose work *The Unfortunate Traveller* stairs are the weapon used to commit homicide. The 'notable bandetto' Esdras of Granado gives a 'box of the ear' to his own mother since she refuses to obey his command, boasting of how he did 'brake her neck down a pair of stairs'.³⁷ Similarly, in the 1592 anonymous play *Arden of Faversham* once Thomas Arden is slaughtered the knife-bearer Shakebag retreats into hiding; but his former mistress the widow Chambley is unwilling to house him and so Shakebag 'spurned her down the stairs, / And broke her neck'.³⁸

Stairs used for violent ends were more than just an unpleasant story reserved for works of fiction. This trend can be traced in testimonies taken to court towards the end of the seventeenth century, such as Grace Allenson's request for marital separation from her husband Charles on the grounds of cruelty in York, 1676. Her libel states that he 'fell upon her' without any just reason, 'beat her and kiked her from one Chamber to another', and 'threw her headlong downe a paire of staires, with great violence and fury'.³⁹ In the same city four years later Mary Smithson takes her husband to court where she explains how he 'attempted to throw or pull her downe the Chamber Sta'res with intent to brake

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 208–09.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 209.

³⁶ Thomas Middleton, 'A Yorkshire Tragedy', in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 1.4.11–14.

³⁷ Thomas Nashe, 'The Unfortunate Traveller (1594)', in *An Anthology of Elizabethan Prose Fiction*, ed. by Paul Salzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 205–309 (pp. 274, 278).

³⁸ Anonymous, *Arden of Faversham in Plays on Women*, ed. by Kathleen E. McLuskie and David Bevington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 15.8–9.

³⁹ Borthwick Institute for Archives (BIA), CP/H/3264, Grace Allenson versus Charles Allenson, 6 April 1676.

her neck or Limbs'.⁴⁰ In 1696, again in York, Elizabeth Pickles seeks separation from her husband John after the multiple occasions when he 'in a most barbarous & inhumane manner' did 'dragg her out of bedd [and] traile her about the Roome & down the staires naked & then left her exposed to his servants'. She reveals that on a previous occasion John cruelly threw her 'down a pair of staires headlong [and] thrust her out of the doores in cold winter weather'.⁴¹ Gowing argues that such incidents of violence 'involve both the material objects of the house and its symbolic order: wives infringe the household order, husbands claim to reinforce it'.⁴² Through displays of brute force upon domestic stairs, abusive husbands attempted to control the architectures of the home and those who dwelt within.

Taken to the same city's church courts within twenty years of each other, these cases illustrate the regularity of wives being pushed down stairs and it can be supposed that many more instances remained unreported.⁴³ Fay Bound argues that women's testimonies often invoked recognisable images of appropriate or inappropriate civil conduct and it can be observed how these testimonies both align themselves with the fictional theme of the abuse women faced on staircases and add to this as a wider cultural experience.⁴⁴ The most notorious example is that of Amy Robsart, Robert Dudley's wife, who was found with her neck broken at the bottom of her household's stairs in 1560. The accidental or intentional nature of her death has been debated ever since and is considered to be a defining scandal of Elizabeth I's reign.⁴⁵ Husbands seeking power over their wives by pushing them downstairs was therefore a culturally recognisable form of violence throughout the early modern period and one that contributes to the scholarship by

⁴⁰ BIA, CP/H/3469, Lady Mary Smithson versus Sir Jerome Smithson, date unknown, 1680.

⁴¹ BIA, CP/H/4505, Elizabeth Pickles versus John Pickles, 24 March 1696.

⁴² Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 212.

⁴³ This might have been due to legal costs which, as Elizabeth Foyster notes, 'meant that litigants [...] were overwhelmingly middle class, and sometimes were men and women of gentry or titled rank', in *Marital Violence: An English Family History, 1660–1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 20.

⁴⁴ Fay Bound, 'An "Uncivil" Culture: Marital Violence and Domestic Politics in York, c. 1660–c.1760', in *Eighteenth-Century York: Culture, Space and Society*, ed. by Mark Hallett and Jane Rendall (York: Borthwick Text and Calendar, 2003), pp. 50–8 (p. 52).

⁴⁵ Murder, suicide and natural causes have all been variously attributed. Ian Aird was the first to theorise that she suffered from an illness that caused her cancerous bones to become brittle and fracture easily, which is widely accepted by modern historians. See Ian Aird, 'The Death of Amy Robsart', *The English Historical Review* 71 (1956), 69–79. The storyline is often drawn upon in popular Tudor-themed fiction, such as Chris Skidmore, *Death and the Virgin: Elizabeth, Dudley and the Mysterious Fate of Amy Robsart* (London: Phoenix, 2011); Philippa Gregory, *The Virgin's Lover* (London: Harper, 2007); and earlier in Walter Scott, *Kenilworth: A Romance* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1821).

Lawrence Stone, Margaret Hunt, Elizabeth Foyster and others who explore contemporary marital abuse in England.⁴⁶ Yet the libels prove that despite the physical violence husbands exerted on stairs, their wives' verbal renditions of these encounters in court reveal a complex struggle for domestic control that was not always won by muscle alone.

Families

Domestic power was not solely disputed by spouses, and husbands who 'spurned', 'threw' or 'pulled' their wives downstairs was just one way of exercising physical control upon the architectural structure. Another method was devised by parents who sought to discipline their children, such as John Isham's commanding of his daughter to run upstairs. This is recorded in Elizabeth Isham's handwritten autobiography, which is now referred to as her *Booke of Remembrance*, offering a glimpse into the life and meditations of a never-married woman in early modern England.⁴⁷ Baptised in 1608, she was the eldest of three children born to Judith and John, living in her family home of Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire for most of her life.⁴⁸ Between 1638 and 1639 Isham kept a diary in which she records her bodily experiences in relation to her domestic space and the paternal force inflicted upon her.

When Isham was in her 'thirteenth yeere', her seventy-year-old grandmother died. Deeply affected, the diarist laments that 'long after this I was sorrowfull for her' and in the two years since her grandmother's death she feels a 'coldnes of stomacke', describing how 'a faintnes tooke me as soone as I was up. or a while after'. Isham observes that her ailment is not caused by 'defect of nutriment' since she is not cured by the consumption of plain foods such as a 'bisket or som litle thing which I thinke did me no hurt', nor is it 'a signe of eating too letle or too much'. Pious and devoted, she believes that her condition is a sign of her 'unhappy soule rejoice[ing]' and her body 'being overburdened with ill juice and moisture'.⁴⁹ But her father, John, is convinced that she is a victim of the green

⁴⁶ Bound, pp. 51-3; Margaret Hunt, 'Wife Beating, Domesticity and Women's Independence in Eighteenth-Century London', *Gender and History* 4 (1992), 10-33 (pp. 11-12); Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 199. Foyster discusses the repercussions of spousal abuse and its effects on children, but does not look at abuse directly aimed at other family members. See Foyster, pp. 129-67.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Isham, *Booke of Remembrance* (c. 1638), Princeton University Library (PUL), RTC01 (no. 62). The spelling for *Booke of Remembrance* is taken from Isham, 2v.

⁴⁸ Kate Aughterson, 'Isham, Elizabeth (bap. 1608, d. 1654), diarist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2013) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/68093>>. [Accessed 18 December 2019].

⁴⁹ PUL, RTC01 (no. 62), 17r.

sickness, which early modern medical doctors believe suppressed menstruation and principally affected young maids.⁵⁰ The disease's first medical description was provided by the physician Johann Lange in his 1554 book *Medicinalium Epistolarum Miscellanea*, an enduring theory stating that the green sickness was caused by sexual abstinence and sufferers should therefore 'live with men as soon as possible, and have intercourse'.⁵¹ This should take place within marriage, as the ultimate goal for faithful women in Protestant England, or if an alternative cure was required then maids should undergo venesection.⁵²

Isham's father is intent on curing his daughter, although he appears to have sought inspiration not from Lange's popular medical treatise but from an innovative medical theory by Robert Burton that had first been published in 1621. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton argues that 'labour and exercise' can 'qualifie and divert' the virgin's disease because 'seldom should you see a hired servant [or] a poor handmaid [...] that is kept hard to her work and bodily labour [...who is] troubled in this kind'.⁵³ Similarly, Isham is subjected to strenuous physical activity about the house although this is not enacted in the form of domestic chores. She writes of how her father 'injoynd me to runn up easy staires (which was of three parts) twelfe times and to rest me once. but my wind was so good that sometimes I runn them all and not rest once'.⁵⁴ Marginal notes to the left of this entry disclose the duration of Isham's prescription: the 'exorcise' is undertaken every 'morning and evening' for '4 or 5 yeres'.⁵⁵ Isham's account therefore reveals an unusual treatment for purging green sickness that is in lieu of the 'bodily labour' proposed by Burton.⁵⁶ The 'coldnes' of Isham's stomach is warmed by running upstairs rather than through sexual intercourse; her clogged body is opened by exercise and her blood is thinned, according to contemporary medicine, rather than drained. Compared to the remedies proposed by Lange in which an appropriate marital suitor would have to be picked or a doctor called to perform the phlebotomy, her father's treatment creates an

⁵⁰ Green sickness, the disease of virgins, chlorosis and white fever are thought to be the same 'illness' insofar as they express the same anxieties about female puberty. See Helen King, *The Disease of Virgins: Green Sickness, Chlorosis, and the Problems of Puberty* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 135.

⁵¹ William Crosby, 'Whatever Became of Chlorosis?', *Journal of the American Medical Association* 257 (1987), 2799-2800 (p. 2799); Johann Lange, *Medicinalium Epistolarum Miscellanea* (Basel: J. Oporinus, 1554), trans. by and qtd. in *Disease of Virgins*, p. 46.

⁵² This is also the advice of the sixteenth-century French physician Guillaume de Baillou, aligning itself with Hippocratic remedies. Discussed in King, p. 71.

⁵³ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by William H. Gass (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), p. 417.

⁵⁴ PUL, RTC01 (no. 62), 17v.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 17v.

⁵⁶ Burton, p. 417.

intimate relationship between his daughter and their shared home. The virgin's disease, Gail Kern Paster notes, creates a 'skewed relation to the object world – a perverse misclassification and use of things'; the father's prescription skews his daughter's relationship with her architectural world as Isham's disordered body becomes domesticated and family-oriented because of her use of stairs.⁵⁷ Power was sought on stairs by regimenting the space, dictating its uses and controlling its users.

In a world where limitations were regularly enforced on women's bodies and actions, certain freedoms from the male grasp were also fought for. Just as the aforementioned marital lawsuits demonstrate how physical control over wives was met with their dialogues of resistance in the courthouse, Isham gains power over her body and home by deviating from her father's exercise regime on the stairs. She confesses to being

sometimes idle and cunning though my father scrichtly examened me. whether I run up so many times or no and from the top to the botome, I should therefore run eleven up ^{of} one part of the three and at last from the tope to the botome of them all. and so Answere him according to his demand.⁵⁸

While Margaret J.M. Ezell argues that the diarist's writing of 'rememberance' is often about forgetting, Isham's physical act upon the material object and her recording of this roughly a decade after the exercise regime ends seem to be pointedly carried out.⁵⁹ Her reluctance to ascend the full three flights prescribed by John is, she confesses, an 'idle and cunning' boycott.⁶⁰ Although her father remains unaware of her shortened journeys upon the stairs, the domestic power is redistributed due to her actions and immortalised in her confessional writing. The architectural philosopher Elizabeth Grosz develops Gilles Deleuze's preposition that 'in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification'.⁶¹ Grosz's argument that travel can overcome territorial authority resonates with Isham's reclamation of the architectural structure.⁶²

⁵⁷ Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 95.

⁵⁸ PUL, RTC01 (no. 62), 17v.

⁵⁹ Margaret J. M. Ezell, 'Elizabeth Isham's *Book of Remembrance* and Forgetting', *Modern Philology*, 109 (2011), 71-84 (p. 73).

⁶⁰ PUL, RTC01 (no. 62), 17v.

⁶¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 3.

⁶² Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge; London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2001), pp. 103-4.

Sharing her secret in the diary's pages, Isham uses stairs to defend her intellectual intuition, regain control over her own body and exert power over her environment.

Isham conflates her corporeal actions upon the staircase with her spiritual climb to reach eternal paradise and bond with her ancestors.⁶³ In the paragraph before her description of exercise, the diarist remarks on how she sought to 'tred in the selfe [the] same stepes towards heaven wherein my forefathers have walked'.⁶⁴ Similarly, in the margins, she writes that her 'mother thought the cause of my illnes was grife for my Granmo[ther]', meaning that her twice-daily runs upon the staircase are associated with both her mother's alternative diagnosis and her deceased grandmother.⁶⁵ While Hillary M. Nunn suggests that Isham's act of writing creates a shared 'textual location made of paper' with her great-grandfather John Isham the first and his annotated prayer-book, so too does the diarist attentively forge connections with her female ancestors in her written content.⁶⁶ Matriarchal connections are strengthened by embarking upon physical and spiritual ascents, exemplifying how the diarist's experiences are inextricably tied to her lived architectures.

Lovers

Subcultures of oppression and rebellion were bred during the acquisition of domestic control, yet those who participated in the social life of stairs often extended beyond the family. Samuel Pepys diligently notes his domestic experiences in his diary, including many anecdotes that centre around his house's staircases and their varied visitors in Seething Lane, London. On 25 March 1661 workmen arrive 'to begin the making of me a new pair of stairs up out of my parlour', but two days later he is dismayed to find the set are 'quite broke down, that I could not get up but by a ladder'.⁶⁷ Three months later,

⁶³ For more on Isham's development of spiritual connections, see Alice Eardley, "'Like hewen stone": Augustine, Audience, and Revision in Elizabeth Isham's *Booke of Remembrance* (c. 1639)', in *Women and Writing, c. 1340–c. 1650: The Domesticisation of Print Culture*, ed. by Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Phillipa Hardman (York: York Medieval Press, 2010), pp. 177-95; Isaac Stephens, 'Confessional Identity in Early Stuart England: The "Prayer Book Puritanism" of Elizabeth Isham', *Journal of British Studies* 50 (2011), 24-47.

⁶⁴ PUL, RTC01 (no. 62), 16v.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 17v.

⁶⁶ Hillary M. Nunn, "'Stepes towards Heaven wherein my forefathers have walked": spirituality, family history, and place in Elizabeth Isham's *My Booke of Remembrance*', *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 24 (2011), 75-80 (p. 76).

⁶⁷ Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. by Robert Latham and William Matthews, 11 volumes (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1971), II.25 (March 1661), p. 59; Pepys, III.27 (March 1661), p. 61.

on 17 June 1661, he employs more labourers ‘who are now about painting my stayres’, a redecoration project that is completed in the same week, ‘which please me well’.⁶⁸ In addition to these architectural alterations and the accompanying influx of employees, he records a dramatic series of unexpected encounters that occur in the same location. He writes of a chilling incident when, with his wife Elizabeth, ‘our young gibb-cat did leap down our stairs from the top to bottom at two leaps and frightened us, that we could not tell well whether it was the cat or a spirit, and do sometimes think [...] that the house might be haunted’, emphasising how unexpected uses of the architectural structure can render even its owners powerless.⁶⁹ On another occasion, when he is unceremoniously awoken by a knock at his front door, Pepys ‘rose and ranted’ at both the maid and his friend William Hewer ‘and swore I could find my heart to kick them downstairs’, a threat that remains empty despite the evidence we have seen elsewhere in contemporary sources that this was not always the case.⁷⁰

Despite the trend in forcing inhabitants up or down the architectural structure, physical and spatial experiences upon stairs were not always engineered to have sinister outcomes. Pepys also uses domestic stairs as a location for pleasurable and often salacious activities. While strolling around Rochester Castle on 2 October 1665, he ‘did upon the stairs overtake three pretty maids or women’ and he takes the opportunity to ‘besarlas muchas vezes et tocar leur mains and necks, to my great pleasure’, concealing their intimate moment with a comical mix of Spanish and French that is characteristic of his sexual writing.⁷¹ In Pepys’s own house on 23 March 1666, ‘going out of my dressing-room, when ready to go downstairs, I spied little Mrs Tooker, my pretty little girl’; he was ‘glad of her coming, she being a very pretty child and now grown almost a woman’.⁷² His elevated position at the top of the stairs and the architectural structure’s abundance of slits and peep holes provide a perfect vantage point from which to inconspicuously admire the adolescent form of Frances Tooker. Domestic stairs are used as a place to meet new admirers as well as a meeting place for old lovers. While visiting the lodgings of Sir Edward Montagu on 7 November 1662, Pepys hears that the housekeeper and his occasional lover Sarah is recently married, and so he ‘did go upstairs again and joy her and kiss her’.⁷³ The diarist returns to Sarah’s familiar embrace, selecting a secluded domestic location for their extramarital affair whilst euphemistically alluding to their rendezvous in his description of ascent.

⁶⁸ Pepys, II.17 (June 1661), p. 123; Pepys, II.19 (June 1661), p. 124.

⁶⁹ Pepys, VIII.29 (November 1667), p. 553.

⁷⁰ Pepys, IV.21 (July 1663), p. 236.

⁷¹ Pepys, VI.2 (October 1665), p. 249.

⁷² Pepys, VII.23 (March 1666), pp. 80-1.

⁷³ Pepys, III.7 (November 1662), p. 251.

Amorous encounters upon the architectural structure were not only indulged upon by Pepys. Examples can be traced throughout the seventeenth century and the frequency with which lovers met on stairs was reflected in popular language surrounding the structure's use, which was sometimes sexually charged and upheld morally dubious implications. As a result, ascent was often referenced in cases of defamation and stairs frequently feature in statements of sexual slander. In a case taken to the London church courts in January 1690, three of the four witnesses claim that they overheard the defendant Mrs Hammond 'scolding at the sayd prodestant' Mrs Sounes and calling her a 'whore, who lay upon the Cellar stayres, for two Bottles of wine'.⁷⁴ Reclining is, in this instance, a loaded bodily posture; it implies the presence of someone else upon the architectural structure and suggests that their encounter is necessarily amorous. Hammond's insult is heightened by her assertion that the sexual liaison occurs not simply on a staircase but, specifically, on a set situated in the cellar, the lowest stairs of all. The public scolding of Sounes therefore seeks to make known her equally low personal standards.

On 19 October 1680, Richard Oldith testifies that he witnessed Mary Lamberth accuse Elizabeth Cannett of being a 'whore' who had been 'Knockd upon the said Market house staires'.⁷⁵ Despite 'Knockd' having sexual undertones, the euphemism still retains traces of its common usage, corrupting an everyday encounter of innocently bumping into someone on an often crowded architectural structure. Mixing the lexically ordinary with implicit debauchery, the case suggests that users of even the most public stairs are vulnerable to being accused, justly or unjustly, of amorous sexual encounters. Considerably earlier, in 1634, Joane Crouch from Dorchester reportedly told Robert Carder that if she let him 'goe up into her chamber' then she would be whipped, as had happened to their acquaintance Mrs Gasse after she went upstairs with another man.⁷⁶ 'Punishment was constantly in the mind's eye', Paul Griffiths argues, and remembering this shows 'how deeply rooted the law was in the minds of early modern people'.⁷⁷ But Crouch's concern is not phrased in a way that suggests the only crime worthy of punishment is the act of having intercourse. Instead, climbing stairs with someone of the opposite sex can be easily construed as a euphemism for planning to have sex, which carries just as much risk if the lovers were to be caught. These cases prove that there was

⁷⁴ London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), DL/C/243, Mrs Hammond versus Mrs Sounes, January 1690.

⁷⁵ LMA, DL/C/239, Elizabeth Cannett versus Mary Lambert, 19 October 1680.

⁷⁶ DRC, DOB/8/1, 96v, in Paul Griffiths, 'Punishing Words: Insults and Injuries, 1525-1700', in *The Extraordinary and the Everyday in Early Modern England: Essays in Celebration of the Work of Bernard Capp*, ed. by Angela McShane and Garthine Walker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 66–85 (p. 70).

⁷⁷ Griffiths, 'Punishing Words', pp. 80, 70.

a continuing discourse about stairs during the seventeenth century and the language surrounding ascent could take on complex implications that builds erotic apprehension and makes users vulnerable to allegations of inappropriate conduct.

Lodgers and Landlords

The risk of drawing unwanted attention at home was not only endured by lovers and was particularly threatening to non-family members who lived together. In early modern English cities, a landlord's quarters and lodgers' rooms commonly featured in the same dwelling, meaning that privacy was difficult to achieve and secrets were hard to keep hidden. On 20 November 1697 Jane Watson is 'Indicted for Murdering her Female Bastard Child' and brought to trial the following month, on 8 December. Watson lives in rented quarters above her landlord and landlady's shop, and so when the owners 'perceiv[e] a drop of Blood on the Stairs', they take it upon themselves to confront their tenant who they believe to be pregnant. Upon entering her chamber they discover the dead infant in a 'Box at the Bed's foot'. Watson defends herself by stating that the baby had been 'Still-born, and that it was delivered two days before', which she imputes to being due to 'a fright she had by a Horse'. The gender-specific pronouns 'she' and 'her' are solely reserved for the mother whereas the corpse is always referred to as 'it' in the transcription of the defendant's testimony, meaning that human qualities are attributed solely to Watson and the infant is removed of sex and life by the law court's scribe.⁷⁸

The marks upon the communal stairs are initially used against Watson to suggest that she intentionally brought harm to her baby, yet as the case progresses, further evidence is provided attesting to there being no 'Marks of Violence' on the already dead infant but, rather, it is Watson who is injured during the birth. She calls upon the qualities of the architectural structure to both defend her actions and deflect the blame towards her litigants. Playing upon stairs' height and ability to create distance between storeys – not to mention the open structure of stairs as a carrier of sound – in her defence, Watson states that 'she had made provision for her Child, and call'd for help, which could not be heard below stairs because of the great Noise there, her Landlord keeping a Tin-Shop'.⁷⁹ Due to the property owner's raucous activity downstairs, the defendant had been unable to carry out the urgent tasks of quickly obtaining help or officially announcing the death of her child with the expertise of a midwife. Emily Cockayne argues that the rebuilding of

⁷⁸ Old Bailey Proceedings (OBP), t16971208-2, trial of Jane Watson, 8 December 1697. <www.oldbaileyonline.org>. Accessed 15 December 2018.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

cities in the seventeenth century ‘increased the ease with which private spaces could be created’, and the enlarged distance between neighbours reduced noise disturbances.⁸⁰ Cockayne states that it was ‘long known that the debilitating impact of sounds could be alleviated with thoughtful building and construction’, but as the court case of Watson indicates, these design theories were not always implemented in practice.⁸¹ Rather than incorporating strategic partitions so that ‘spaces used for noisy activities were separated from those intended for quiet repose’, as Cockayne contends, noise did travel and staircases were a key space in which this was hard to prevent.⁸² The architectural structure first referred to by Watson’s property owners to accuse her of infanticide was then transformed by the defendant to work in her favour, alleviating herself from the blame of manslaughter while making her accusers culpable. The public nature of the house-share’s staircase was used to protect and defend the private self.

Shared dwellings were common where space was at a premium and the population was growing. Based on the 1692 poll tax returns for the City of London, an estimated forty-seven percent of houses contained subsidiary lodgers.⁸³ With lodgers came visitors, which in turn created a difficulty in monitoring the bodies using stairs. There were occasions in which this struggle to control the architectural structure was taken advantage of. On 30 April 1679, an unnamed ‘young woman’ is tried for ‘Murthering her (supposed) Bastard-childe’ when ‘a Fellow living in the same house, accidentally found something under the stairs wrapt up in a Cloth’. The bundle is inspected and ‘upon opening proved to be a young naked Childe; which had lain so long there, (six or eight weeks, as it was supposed) that ’twas putrified’. After being ‘search’d by a Midwife and some Matrons’, it is clear that the young woman had in fact given birth ‘a year or two ago’. This, in part, results in the maid’s acquittal; but it is also due to the questionable state of privacy within the domestic setting as, ‘being a publick house, it was possible it might be laid there by another’.⁸⁴ While systems of calibrating human traffic would become easier in the eighteenth century with the growing use of locks and the tightly controlled custody of keys, as Amanda Vickery argues, this was more difficult to monitor in early modern residences.⁸⁵ The defendant could not be convicted and it can be presumed that the woman

⁸⁰ Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 118.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁸³ Craig Spence, *London in the 1690s: A Social Atlas* (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, Institute of Historical Research, 2000), p. 90.

⁸⁴ OBP, t1679043-1, trial of a young woman, 30 April 1679. <www.oldbaileyonline.org>. Accessed 15 December 2018.

⁸⁵ Amanda Vickery, ‘An Englishman’s home is his castle? Thresholds, boundaries and privacies in the

who did leave her new-born upon the stairs also escaped punishment. The shared nature of stairs meant that the structure sometimes fell between the gap of responsibility in houses of multiple occupancy.

Neighbours

Even in privately owned properties where inhabitants lived alone, stairs were not exempt from the prying eyes of nosy neighbours. This is illustrated in the lengthy legal dispute dating from the end of the sixteenth century from the Diocese of London Consistory Court over the estate of the deceased widow Anne Willett. Beginning on 4 July 1589, the case is debated over a ten-month period as to whether Willett's fortune should be inherited by her nephew William White or her acquaintances Matthew and Ann Peerson, who are father and daughter. The first two witnesses, Agnes Kendall and Alice Ward, argue that White is deserving of Willett's fortune since the widow was in a 'verie perfecte mynde' with 'perfect of memorie and knew everie bodie well' when she entrusted her possessions to her nephew in her nuncupative will made on the eve of her death.⁸⁶ Furthermore, as Anna Fretherne's statement reveals, Willett's was not an impulsive decision since for 'abowte halfe a yeere now past' the deceased proclaimed that White should be given her fortune.⁸⁷ On the other hand, Matthew and Ann Peerson's first deponent, the sailor William Gorrell, claims that Willett had an equally 'good & perfecte memorye and remembraunce' when she bequeathed her possessions them, an argument that is supported by the next three witnesses.⁸⁸ Despite their conflicting interests, both sides are united in their initial presentation of Willett's body and mind as being perfectly sound, intact and virtuous.

This character reference is sullied, however, by Margaret Johnson in her statement dating from 4 May 1590, who hopes to persuade the court that the Peersons are the worthy owners of Willett's possessions. Johnson begins by stating that she 'dwelleth next dore' to the deceased widow rather than calling herself Willett's neighbour.⁸⁹ In doing so, the witness establishes herself as a reliably close observer by building architectural proximity while simultaneously accentuating her emotional detachment as a more objective witness. This is emphasised again during Johnson's testimony when she reveals that she used to

eighteenth-century London house', *Past & Present* 199 (2008), 147-73 (pp. 160-63).

⁸⁶ LMA, DL/C/213, William White versus Matthew Peerson, 4 July 1589, pp. 518-19.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 612.

‘come and sit with her the said Ann Willetts dore and talk ofte’, a space which ‘carried considerable symbolic weight’ in early modern urban areas, Gowing argues, as ‘the threshold between public and private, household and community’.⁹⁰ Perched on the boundary of the widow’s home but never admitting to passing over her doorstep, Johnson is careful to keep her contact with her neighbour publically visible.

Then begins the destruction of a persona that previous deponents had conjured of Willett as being one of stable body and reliable mind. ‘[T]he Mondaye before the said Ann Willett died’, Johnson recounts, she ‘did see her goe to the brewers’ and purchase a gallon of ale.⁹¹ Temperance was considered a virtue for early modern women who ‘brewed less and purchased beer more for their families’ needs’ as the period progressed, Andrea Cast argues; yet this could be construed as problematic for widows like Willett who lived alone.⁹² Contemporary portrayals of inappropriate drinking would ‘almost invariably feature women whose social and economic status was either marginal or lower-class’, Jessica Warner contends, which in turn suggests that Johnson hopes to destabilise Willett’s persona by exposing her conspicuous consumption and relegating her social standing to the peripheries of society.⁹³ Johnson reveals that merely two days later, on Wednesday night, she heard Willett ‘calle verye piteouslye for drinke’, insinuating that she had rapidly consumed all of the ale by herself and yet still she was desperate for more.⁹⁴ The next morning, Johnson and some other neighbours respond by visiting Willett, who continues to plead for alcohol. As they cross the physical threshold from the public street into her home, Willett’s body is also invaded:

soe sone as they were come they founde her the said Ann Willett calleinge for drincke, sitting upon her steyers in very badd & undecente manner [...and her] selfe soe beastley berayed (that it was nott a sighte for any creature, especially for mankynd, to see) in that sorte that itt was enowgh to make any man lothe her and her sexe.

Ten months after the court case begins, Johnson is the first deponent to denounce the deceased with this public, domestic humiliation. Perhaps fearing her impending death or,

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 612; Gowing, ‘The freedom’, p. 137.

⁹¹ LMA, DL/C/213, p. 612.

⁹² Andrea Cast, ‘Drinking women in early modern English tavern songs’, in *Food, Power and Community: Essays in the History of Food and Drink*, ed. by Robert Dare (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1999), pp. 100-13 (p. 101).

⁹³ Jessica Warner, ‘The sanctuary of sobriety: The emergence of temperance as a feminine virtue in Tudor and Stuart England’, *Addiction* 92 (1997), 97-111 (p. 98).

⁹⁴ LMA, DL/C/213, p. 612.

as Johnson would have us believe, because she is drunk, Willett had defecated over herself, her clothes and upon her stairs. The witness provides a potent representation of an equally putrid character and in the tussle of ownership over the widow's assets the deceased is robbed of body and mind. Stairs play a crucial role in the destabilisation of Willett's character. By 'sitting [...] in a very badd & undecente manner', she situates her body at a height that reveals her modesty to visitors entering the house. This, in turn, allows Johnson to expose Willett's debauched nature and banish her from accepted society by brandishing her as being 'nott a sighte for any creature'.⁹⁵ The significance of the elevation, steepness and openness of staircases, and the variety of optical perspectives created by the structure, are therefore essential to consider alongside the multiple ways in which stairs were used.

Willett's own actions mimic the contours of the architectural space. When the neighbours discover her in this state of disarray they observe 'her face and her countenance & her staringe with her eyes & her gazinge upp and downe & going from place to place in her smock like one half distraughte'.⁹⁶ Willett's compulsively fluctuating lines of sight mean that witnesses at the scene are 'veryly perswaded with themselves' that she is 'halfe madd and distraughte of her witt'.⁹⁷ But in addition to identifying her diminished mental state, visitors believe that Willett is devoid of 'womanlye modestye or honesteye'.⁹⁸ By accentuating Willett's tendency of 'noddinge upp & downe', as described earlier in her testimony, Johnson implies that Willett's wayward gaze lays bare her open, sexualised body and reveals her carnal knowledge.⁹⁹ The widow lasciviously travels 'from place to place in her smock' or undergarments and is caught upon the staircase, as a domestic structure that embodies fleeting moments of transition that were often heavy with erotic implication.¹⁰⁰ In Johnson's account, the visitors are the real heroes of the saga: visitors, she makes clear, that include Mathew Peerson.¹⁰¹ The widow's integrity is marred by Johnson's statement; verbal agreements in which she bequeathed her goods to William White pale in comparison to the repeated acts of kindness that Peerson and indeed Johnson show when attending to the 'half madd' Willett. The deceased's leaking, sexualised body denies her modesty in death due to its location on the stairs and empowers to her neighbours in their attempts to secure her domestic assets.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 612.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 613.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 613.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 613.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 612.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 612.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 614.

Conclusion

‘Social spaces’, as Margaret Pelling and Gowing assert, ‘cannot be captured from a depopulated bird’s eye view’.¹⁰² Studying the struggles for domestic power immediately attends to the imperative notion of difference: that different kinds of stairs in different domestic environments had different users. Stairs were a shared space in which traces of their varied activities often became manifest. It is important to remember Bruce Smith’s assertion that ‘each segment of the day – sunrise, morning, midday, afternoon, sunset, night – would bring its own round of activities, its own distinctive panoply of sounds, even in the same place’.¹⁰³ Smith highlights the likelihood that diverse sensory experiences could be felt within the same location by a wide variety of visitors at numerous points in time, a statement that is central to my argument. The same stairs were used by husbands and wives, families, lovers, lodgers and landlords, as well as neighbours. Smith’s comment, whereby the variety of responders and their individual responses generated a polyphonic conversation about the same built environment, suggests that modes of exchange between individuals were not simply inseparable from but were instead entirely dependent on the space in which they took place. The widespread insertion of stairs in English homes meant that the liminal architectural structure gained cultural significance and accrued powerful metaphorical associations as stories occurred between storeys. The early modern house was, as North proclaims, ‘lay’d on an heap like a wasps-nest’, meaning that the shared space of stairs became a nucleus where swarming inhabitants exerted their domestic control.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Margaret Pelling, ‘Skirting the city? Disease, social change and divided households in the seventeenth century’, in *Londinopolis*, ed. by Griffiths and Jenner, pp. 154-75; Gowing, ‘The freedom’, pp. 130-53. Quotation from Mark S. R. Jenner and Paul Griffiths, ‘Introduction’, in *Londinopolis*, ed. by Griffiths and Jenner, pp. 1-25 (p. 15).

¹⁰³ Bruce Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 55.

¹⁰⁴ North, p. 69.