

# *Ardern of Faversham*

## The Crime:

On St Valentine's Day 1551, Alice Arden put an end to the life of her husband, Thomas, in their home in the Kent town of Faversham. Furthermore, she had varying degrees of help from a startling number of allies: her lover, the tailor Thomas Moseby; Moseby's sister, Cecily Pounder; two of the household servants, Michael Saunderson and Elizabeth Stafford; a local goldsmith, George Bradshaw; another tailor, John Green; and a thug, known to posterity simply as 'Black Will'. Thomas Arden's life had hitherto been one of moderate success. He had worked for Sir Edward North, the lawyer and official who had been the chief manager of the Crown's former monastic lands from 1540 to 1544. Through his service under North, Arden had acquired some of the confiscated properties of Faversham Abbey; he had also acquired a wife, Alice, Sir Edward's step-daughter. The subsequent, grim irony would not have been lost on the former monks of Faversham.

Today, a crime such as this would automatically lead to charges of murder against all and sundry, and some of those who had helped to kill Thomas Arden would indeed be indicted, tried and hung for homicide (the law did not yet distinguish between murder and manslaughter). However, Alice Arden and the two servants were executed for a quite different crime, petty treason. Why, and what was it?

The world of the 16th Century was not only much more hierarchical than our own; it understood its moral purpose through that hierarchy. Therefore, a homicidal attack upon a lawful master was much more heinous than murder. It was a strike against the created order of being itself. Under the 1351 Treason Act, wives who slew husbands were guilty of petty treason. This was also true of servants who slew masters, and of priests who slew their superior clergy. That was because, within the small kingdom of the household or the diocese, they had done what rebels try to do to their king. They had become traitors in miniature. The punishment was consequently worse than the hanging used for other killers. Alice Arden was burned at the stake for killing her husband, and Elizabeth Stafford shared the same fate for helping to kill her master. Saunderson, the male servant, was drawn to the place of execution on a hurdle and then hung, but he was not quartered. The difference in modes of execution reflected the law's horror of female 'petty traitors'. Their lawful subordination to authority was deemed to be the more natural, and their murderous revolt against it consequently deemed the more wicked.

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## The Play:

About forty years after the killing, probably in 1589 or 1590, someone told the story in the form of a play. We don't know where it was first performed, nor by whom, nor exactly when. And when that play was published in 1592, no writer's name was given.

None of this is unusual for plays of that time. Regular commercial theatre in London began no earlier than the conversion of the Red Lion tavern in 1567, perhaps not even until 1576

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when the Theatre, the first dedicated playhouse, was built. Very few of the plays from the next fifteen years have survived. Publishing play scripts was only just beginning to be a recognized part of the book industry when *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham* appeared. Others that came off the press early like *Tamburlaine* or *The Spanish Tragedy* or John Lyly's comedies we see now to be ground-breakers and probably we should see *Arden* in that way too. It is after all the first English tragedy to tell a story centred on people who aren't royal or noble or heroic. It is totally domestic. Yet it is also a history play as much as *Henry IV* or Marlowe's *Edward II*. The story is taken from the same source as those plays, Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Every named character (Franklin excepted) has a counterpart in the true story.

*Arden* seems to have been remarkable enough to be part of a publishers' dispute. In mid-year or later in 1592 the owner of the licence to publish that *Spanish Tragedy* also produced a pirate edition of *Arden*: and the owner of the licence to publish *Arden* produced a pirated *Spanish Tragedy*. The Stationers' Company, arbitrator of such disputes, had both illicit editions destroyed. There was a legitimate reprint in 1599, perhaps indicating a revival on stage, perhaps responding to a number of new domestic tragedies in and around that year, or both. Its next appearance in print was in 1633, nine years before the Civil War closed all playhouses. That edition had an illustration on the title-page of the murder. It may not depict an actual production because the same image was printed in the same year at the top of a broadside ballad, telling the tale in the supposed voice of Alice Arden herself. But the story had clearly lasted on stage for forty years by then.

And it continued to live in performance for centuries after that. There were adaptations of it visible in London in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was performed from time to time by amateurs in Faversham, there was a ballet in London in 1799, an opera in Germany in 1967, and it was performed in Kent as a puppet play from at least 1736 into the 1950s. It turns up in practically every generation in some form, and is now frequently revived on main stages as well as fringe and university venues. The Royal Shakespeare Company last produced it in 2014.

## Who?

We know very little about the details of theatre history at the time *Arden* was first performed and published. But with a play of this quality and longevity, it's not surprising that there's a drive to turn the 'anonymous' writer credit into a name or names. Inevitably, Shakespeare has been connected to the play at various times since 1770: because we have an unfortunate tendency to give him the credit for creating or inspiring anything remarkable in the drama of the 1590s and early 1600s. But other writers are available. And it's possible that Shakespeare himself wasn't available, given our ignorance of his activity and whereabouts in 1589-90, the likely time of *Arden*'s creation.

Nowadays, scholars attribute plays largely on a close analysis of linguistic habits displayed by writers and exhibited in plays----not repeated phrases or images, but preferences and usages a writer has at a subconscious level. On that basis, in the last sixty years a growing number of scholars have found Shakespeare's hand in several places in the middle of the play. There is one particular scene which has an emotional complexity and even delicacy that seems to me beyond the range of any other playwright we know of in those years and which

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is furthermore one in which Shakespeare's habits are most visible. No. I won't say which. Spoilers.

If we accept that Shakespeare was involved in the writing, then it would have been very early on in his career, and we shouldn't expect his contribution to be very like what we know of him later. And given that there would be writers working who had been playwrights for a decade or more before he came along, we shouldn't assume that he would be the senior partner in any collaboration. Scarcely any solo plays by those more experienced playwrights remains, but there are one or two telling connections with Thomas Watson. He composed two of the earliest Elizabethan sonnet sequences and was notable as both dramatist and poet in Latin, but who appears also to have been a prolific writer for the commercial theatres. While working on this production I read Watson's surviving work in English and though I remain uncertain I wouldn't declare his involvement impossible. Putting together my knowledge of *Arden*, my understanding of the scholarship and research around the linguistic habits and the plausibility of a senior-junior partnership, I felt confident enough to announce the production as by 'young Shakespeare and a senior collaborator.'

But other writers are still available. There are arguments to be made for Thomas Kyd, who wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*, one of the biggest hits on the Elizabethan stage, also published in 1592. These again are partly linguistic, partly based on perceived similarities in dramaturgy: and were felt to be strong enough to warrant *Arden* being included in a new edition of Kyd's works currently being published: just as other scholars felt the arguments for Shakespeare were strong enough to warrant *Arden* being included in the New Oxford edition of *his* works in 2016.

Once, I acted in stagings of *Arden* and *Spanish Tragedy* within a few months of each other. In modern times, this is not a position many people have been in. I was already familiar with both plays by then and with much of the output of early 1590s playhouses. For what that experience is worth, I had no sense at the time that the two scripts were the work of one creator. What was important then----as it is now----was the quality of *Arden*, its powerful emotions, its veering from passionate to comic to horrifying and back again, and the many facets of its central female character, a role to rank with the finest in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. In the end, we should be concerned not with the writing credits but with the template the script offers for emotional, intelligent----and yes, tragic----performances.

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