

Seminar on *Arden of Faversham*

Seminar Conveners: Terri Bourus & Gary Taylor

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ABSTRACTS

Cassie Ash (Independent Scholar)

“Character Loyalty vs. Directorial Vision in *Arden of Faversham*”

In 2015, the Brave Spirits Theatre production of *Arden of Faversham* proposed a sardonic look at the play’s misogyny, but outside of program notes there was little discernible bias built into the performance. I would like to explore the tension between readings of characters we now recognize as socially, ethically, or morally misguided, and their sometimes sympathetic treatment in text. I’m particularly interested in how productions can take seriously a character’s dramatic action (and therefore an actor’s characterization concerns) without endorsing his or her unsavory qualities.

Frederick Bengtsson (University of Kentucky)

“For simple truth is gracious enough’: *Arden of Faversham* as Naked Tragedy”

My paper takes as its starting point the epilogue to *Arden of Faversham*, specifically Franklin’s apparent apology for the “naked tragedy” that has just concluded. Treating this epilogue not as an apology, but rather as a declaration about *Arden*’s status as true tragedy, I examine the play’s investment in the staging of “simple truth,” which the play identifies as the fundamental work of tragedies. I argue that the play represents an attempt to theorize a new form of tragedy; that *Arden*, in other words, is “naked” not because of its deficiencies, but because it reveals the essence of the tragic genre.

Dianne Berg (Tufts University)

“’Tis Fearful Sleeping in a Serpent’s Bed’: Recapturing and Containing the Petty Traitor”

The unbridled female subjectivity enacted in Alice Arden’s domestic coup d’etat was deeply unsettling in a culture where the home was analogized as “a little commonwealth,” making mariticide not simply murder but petit treason. Masculine anxieties about homicidal helpmeets reflect concerns about gender, sexuality, sovereignty, the family as microcosmic kingdom, and the fragility of the state. Domestic tragedies like *Arden* seek to contain, neutralize, and rehabilitate unruly females, and this paper examines

how this emerging theatrical genre arrogates “true crime” narratives to provide titillating glimpses of wifely insubordination while reifying the conservative status quo in a time of political uncertainty.

Terri Bourus (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis)

"Staging *Arden of Fevershame*"

This paper examines and contests the claim by Martin Wiggins (2008) that *Arden* was written by an amateur playwright. I argue that the unusual use of the stage directions "here" and "then" does not "imply" a writer imagining the action from the auditorium, rather than backstage. I describe the staging options for Shakebag's fall "into the ditch", showing that it was practicable in Elizabethan theatres. Finally, I demonstrate that the exceptionally long role of Alice has been carefully structured for ease of performance, and identify a 1580s boy actor who could have played it.

Dori Coblentz (Emory University)

“*Arden’s Plot: Space and Pace in Arden of Feversham*”

This paper looks to the attempted murder sequences of *Arden of Feversham* to argue that the Elizabethan stage is an antagonistic environment characterized by an adversarial and interruptive model of time. I focus on the qualitative and spatially-charged modes of temporality expressed by *kairos*, *tempo*, and *plot*. I argue that *Arden* suggests a version of theatrical time in which human skill at manipulating the time of one’s adversary (*tempo*) joins with the fortuitous temporality of non-human forces and events (*kairos*). I conclude that opportunity, rather than linear narrative, is the driving force of *Arden’s* many “plots.”

Charles Conaway (University of Southern Indiana)

“‘Be patient, gentle friend, and learn of me’: Bad Council and the Voice of Moral Authority in *Arden of Feversham*”

My paper will discuss the role of Arden’s friend, Franklin, considering his progression from a character who offers poor advice—both in terms of Arden’s relationship with Alice and in regard to his position as a landowner in Feversham—to a character whose Epilogue closes the play with a moral authority that suggests a kind of omniscient wisdom. Such a transformation is supported, in part, by the plot: Franklin seems to change his position about Arden’s relationship with Alice, at least, when he sees her kissing Mosby in the streets of Feversham.

But I also want to think of Franklin as a character who represents the responsibility of the community to advise, or if necessary, shame friends and neighbors so that they might properly discipline their

households and function as benign landlords rather than petty tyrants. In such a light, to what extent might Franklin's transition from poor advisor to the voice of moral authority and condemnation demonstrate the process in which the community abdicates its responsibilities and privatizes the historically communal functions of discipline and shaming? Furthermore, given Franklin's connections to the Duke of Somerset, to what extent does he represent a process in which attention is shifted from the state's institutionalized confiscation of property to individual acts of dispossession?

Alan Dessen (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

“*Arden's Ditch*”

My focus is on the connection (in the original theatrical vocabulary) between two segments: 1) the fog sequence (in which the would-be murderers miss their victim and Shakebag falls into a ditch) and 2) the major part of scene 13 (omitted in Polly Findlay's 2014 RSC production) in which, after the final unsuccessful murder attempt, Arden egregiously believes Alice's explanation. Arden escapes in #1 thanks to the fog and the Ferryman but goes off to his death in #2 when he ignores Franklin-Reason in a tug-of-war that results in his version of Shakebag's fall (though not into a ditch).

Laurie Maguire (University of Oxford)

“*Arden and (the) Franklin's Tale*”

From title page to epilogue, *Arden of Faversham* is at pains to stress that it is a true story. But Franklin's claim that he presents 'simple truth' is false: Franklin himself is 'foisted in', the one fictional character in a play that otherwise follows its source in Holinshed. The play is, in fact, Franklin's story and his role throughout is to tell tales.

But Franklin is not the only character to narrate: the play is structured round inset stories. In this paper I investigate the play's interest in tale-telling, truth and fiction, and the role of narrative within drama.

Dennis McCarthy () & June Schlueter (Lafayette College)

“*A Cruel Murder Done in Kent: Revisiting Arden of Faversham*”

Although several scholars have explored the authorship question, no one has considered the possibility that the ~1592 *Arden of Faversham* was an adaptation. We propose that the play variously attributed to Shakespeare and Kyd was decades old in 1592 and that Sir Thomas North, translator of Plutarch's Lives, was its original author. The evidence is of three kinds: 1) the inventory of parallel passages, phrases, and collocations shared by *Arden* and North's *The Dial of Princes* (1557, 1568); 2) North's own family story, including his relationship to those involved in the murder, his father's role in the dissolution of the

monasteries, and commentary by Dudley, 4th Lord North a century after the 1550/1 real-life crime; and (3) Edward White's 1577 registration of a work entitled *A Cruel Murder Done in Kent*. Shakespeare and/or Kyd likely adapted the work in the early 1590s.

Tara E. Pedersen (University of Wisconsin-Parkside)

“Tailors, Cutters, and Botched Jobs: Social Stratification and the Unraveling of Tradition in *Arden of Faversham*”

As a contender for membership in the Shakespearean canon, *Arden of Faversham* is, to some extent, a text that inspires readers to seek the familiar and coherent. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques used to determine authorship appeal to this impulse, as the search for patterns of language, imagery, or (to use the words of MacDonald P. Jackson) particular “kinds of imagination and habits of mind” offer readers the opportunity to uncover Shakespeare's hand here or there within the text. While I certainly appreciate the appeal of such approaches and techniques, I would like briefly to suspend this line of questioning to ask instead what might emerge from a reading of *Arden* that pauses over the clumsy, the unfamiliar, and the poorly patched. Put another way, I wish to look at “botched jobs” within the play and what they have to teach us about social stratification and traditional sources of authority in early modern England.

Catherine Richardson (University of Kent)

“Scene of the Murder’: *Arden of Faversham* and local performance cultures”

This paper aims to explore part of a key aspect of *Arden*'s curious appeal – the relationships it sets up between local events and national principles. I want to consider these connections here in relation to an initial study of the play's dual performance history. Whilst we know little about the very early staging of *Arden*, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards significant local and national playing traditions can be identified. Consideration of their similar and different motivations and the criteria for success in both cases offers insight into the relationship between national and provincial tastes and the functions of the play's famously detailed topography.

Tom Rooney (Central European University)

“Selling Tragedy at the Sign of the Gun (1592-3)”

The aim of this paper is to reconsider the publication of *The lamentable and true tragedie of M. Arden of Feuersham* in the context of other tragedies available on page and stage in the late 1580s/early 1590s. Only a few tragedies had been published in the previous decade. And evidence suggests they were not staged as often as other genres. Yet stationer Edward White clearly saw a market for them when he issued

Arden, a pirated version of *The Spanish tragedy*, and *The tragedye of Solyman and Perseda* at his bookshop outside the little north door of St. Paul's.

Gary Taylor (Florida State University)

"Thomas Watson and *Arden of Faversham*"

Recent scholarship has converged on identifying Shakespeare as author of much or all of scenes 5-8, but that leaves most of the play unattributed, and all known authors of surviving plays have been ruled out. Jackson identifies four potential candidates who are known to have written plays at some point in the years between 1580-1600, but with no surviving single-author plays: Achelley, Drayton, Hathway, and Watson. This paper argues that the first three are implausible, but that Watson's biography, originality, and idiosyncratic style all strongly link him to *Arden*.

Larry Weiss (

"Recent Scholarship on the Attribution of *Arden of Faversham*"

MacDonald Jackson's 2014 book gathering and updating his prior writings attributing portions of *Arden of Faversham* (and all of *A Lover's Complaint*) to Shakespeare provides a convenient jumping off place to survey modern scholarship on those issues, most of which is computer aided. Using Jackson's work as a starting point, I report the status of current scholarship, pro and con, on whether any portion of *Arden* can be ascribed to Shakespeare and, if so, which portion(s). The research and conclusions of Brian Vickers, Arthur Kinney (with Hugh Craig), Martina Tarlinskaya and the team of Ward Elliott and Robert J. Valenza will be considered, and I interpose some observations of my own.