

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Arden of Faversham*, presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre, Stratford on Avon, June to October, 2014**

Neil Forsyth  
University of Lausanne  
[neil.forsyth@unil.ch](mailto:neil.forsyth@unil.ch)

Directed by Polly Findlay. With Sharon Small (Alice Arden), Ian Redford (Arden), Keir Charles (Mosby), Elspeth Brodie (Susan), Geoffrey Freshwater (Franklin), Ian Bonar (Michael), Christopher Middleton (Clarke), Jay Simpson (Will), Tony Jayawardena (Shakebag), Joe Bannister (Lord Cheyne).

The title of this anonymous play, published in its first Quarto edition in 1592, unequivocally refers to the man whose scandalous murder is its main event. Structurally, however, the central figure is his wife. She it is who wants his death so that she can have unlimited access to his wealth; she it is who plans the murder with her lover Mosby; and she it is who eventually succeeds, only to experience remorse when she realizes the gravity of her crime. So much is she the central figure of the play that the Royal Shakespeare Company included it in its season of plays for the Swan Theatre in 2014 entitled 'Roaring Girls', four plays with 'powerful, fascinating women at their heart',<sup>1</sup> which also included *The Roaring Girl*, *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The White Devil*.

The production at the Swan updated the story to the present and made vulgarity the dominant note of its modern dress approach. In the original play, Arden is a greedy landlord profiting from the chance to own land after the dissolution of the monasteries. The play turns on the way land has become a commodity, and Arden deprives several people of their living by appropriating their land. In the production, all that survived of that realistic representation of Elizabethan middle-class life was the world of commodity (the printed programme contained a discourse on the subject, quoting Marx). Arden (Ian Redford) was a businessman selling tacky imported Japanese cats as good luck charms, items you might find in Poundland. These grotesque figures actually

---

<sup>1</sup> Programme for *Arden of Faversham* (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2014), p. 2.

waved their paws in what came to seem an 'I'm gonna get you' gesture, and the play ended with a back wall of them waving collectively in a gothic horror of retribution. Everything in this world was cheap and fake and changeable, much like the marriage vows of fickle Alice (Sharon Small in a vulgar short skirt and suburban attitude), and the bling that marked her lover, Mosby (Keir Charles as an upwardly mobile, streetwise and thuggish charmer).

The cats represented a world of celebrity and commodity culture where all is cheap fantasy. They suggested the world of the reality TV show *The Apprentice*, where what counts — all that counts — is self-presentation: Arden had become Alan Sugar (or Donald Trump in the US version). Ian Redford captured the cruelty and greed of that kind of ruthless businessman who thoroughly deserves what he gets, but the complications of the character, especially his oddly passive devotion to his wife in spite of her dalliance with Mosby, got rather lost. At the end, though, real morality somewhat oddly broke through and we heard of the Elizabethan cruelty of burning traitors and witches at the stake.

The programme included a long disquisition on 'Femininity Disturbed' which reviewed the cases of modern women who commit murder, including Myra Hindley, Rose West, Joanna Dennehy and Amanda Knox. The murdering Alice of this production did not, fortunately, evoke any of those parallels, except in that she certainly had power over the men in her life: she was able as in the text of the original play, to allay her husband's suspicions about her affair with Mosby several times, even when he hears her uttering his name in her sleep — thinking quickly she first says 'Tis like I was asleep when I named him / For being awake he comes not in my thoughts' (1.67-68).<sup>2</sup> Her husband then tells her she started up and instead of him, 'caught me about the neck' (70), but she manages to make him think that since he was the only one there, the hug was meant for him, and that in any case it was only a dream.

Throughout the play, there is a persistent thread of black comedy as the repeated efforts to kill Arden are thwarted. At times the production turned these efforts into splendidly funny scenes. The hired hit-men of spectacular incompetence, Black Will and Shakebag (played by Jay Simpson and Tony Jayawardena), their names perhaps satirical references to Shakespeare, found themselves up on a balcony in an ideal sniper's position to shoot Arden, but the mail-order rifle proved to be too complicated for them to put together, a scene perhaps inspired by the Coen Brothers or by the similar repeated efforts in *The Ladykillers*. At other times they fell into ditches, got lost in the fog and missed every other opportunity to terminate their target. Indeed there was something cartoonish about the whole conception of this production. Serious moments were quickly followed by renewed farce, and yet it still seemed rather silly to have a banquet

---

<sup>2</sup> Act, scene and line references refer to the edition in *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology*, ed. by Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

right after killing someone. The upbeat direction by Polly Findlay converted Lord Cheyne into a health-nut cyclist, Mosby into an Essex wideboy and Susan the maid into an obsessive cleaner.

The play was considerably cut: Franklin, for example, invented by the playwright as a confidant for Arden, lost many of his lines, and his epilogue was given to Sharon Small to speak. This required her to move out of character, but it did stress her dominance of the stage as this particular Roaring Girl.

The play is unusual in that it is based on an actual event: on the title page it calls itself 'THE LAMENTABLE AND TRUE TRAGEDIE OF M. ARDEN *Of FEVERSHAM* IN KENT. *Who was most wickedly murdered, by the meanes of his disloyall and wanton wyfe [...]* Wherein is shewed the great mal-ice and discimulation of a wicked woman, the unsatiable desire of filthie lust and the shamefull end of all murderers'. It may be the earliest surviving example of a popular genre in the Renaissance, domestic tragedy, which focused on recent and local events rather than the distant mythical or historical events of Shakespeare's or other contemporary plays. The first extant account is in the *Breviat Chronicle* for 1551, which briefly recounts the actual murder on St Valentine's day and spends longer on the punishment of the perpetrators: his wife 'was burned at Canterbury, and [...] at Faversham (two) hanged in chains [...], and a woman burned [...] and in Smithfield was hanged one Mosby and his sister for the murder also'.<sup>3</sup> Their goods, valued at £184 10s 4½d, were forfeited to the local treasury, while the city of Canterbury received 43s for executing George Bradshaw and for burning Alice alive. Two of the accomplices escaped: the painter William Blackbourne and the hired hitman Shakebag, who probably did the actual killing.<sup>4</sup> Bradshaw's conviction, based entirely on the contents of a sealed letter he delivered to Alice, was later overturned. Many of these details were retained by the anonymous author of the play, and make it ripe for comic treatment. But the vivid historical realism of this original context, not to mention the complexity of the characters, got lost in this production's effort to substitute for them the crassness of our contemporary world.

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Kinney, *Renaissance Drama*, p. 229.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.