The Problem of Sin and Crime in Domestic Tragedy

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The domestic tragedies I am concerned with – *Arden of Faversham*, *A Warning for Fair Women*, *Two Lamentable Tragedies*, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* – were all written in a short pace of time, between about 1590 and about 1605. They belong to a particular moment in the religious and social culture of early modern England, which can be characterised in several ways. First, this was a time, in the post-Reformation period, when people believed themselves to be living in an alarmingly disorderly and sinful society. Historians concur in observing ‘an unprecedented concern about crime at an institutional level’\(^1\) although in fact levels of violent crime and disorder were gradually declining. Popular writers on crime, who did not generally use that term, regularly present themselves as living in times of exceptional wickedness. The author of *A World of wonders. A masse of Murthers. A Covie of cosenages* (1595) typically remarks on the variety of evil to be observed, such as ‘carnall and most unnaturall murthers, detestable periuries, cankered covetousne, incestuous adulterie, hardnes of hart, peevish extortion, exactious extorion, exactious usury, and divers most horrible and abhominable practices’\(^2\). Another writer singles out one crime for special mention; in *The Crying Murther: Contayning the cruell and most horrible Butchery of Mr Trat, Curate of olde Cleave* (1624) it is observed that ‘our modern murders, which are the most raging where other sins are most reigning, seems equal, though not for number, yet for the manner unto those of the Mahometan assassins . . . or to the Italian banditos’\(^3\). Thomas Scott, a puritan

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\(^3\) Anon., *The Crying Murther: Contayning the cruell and most horrible Butchery of Mr Trat, Curate of olde Cleave* (London: Nathaniel Butter, 1624), sig. A4v.
preacher, was not alone in his view that ‘this Nation of ours at this day, out-sinnes all the Nations of the world, even in the proper sinnes for which they have beene infamous’.  

The wealth of comment by both preachers and officials of state on criminality of the time has been described as ‘a source so voluminous as to be embarrassing’.  

The penal system then in force appears extremely punitive and increasingly so, especially in its attitudes towards crimes of poverty. It was a system that aimed for deterrence and retribution, for social control, not for reformation. But at the same time there was an evident gap between criminal offences and sentences, more relevant perhaps to minor felonies than to homicides, such that it is fair to say that ‘the technical definition of criminality and the operative definition of criminality were not the same’.  

To account for this gap, Cynthia Herrup draws upon the influence of the prevailing religious mindset and ‘the belief in a common propensity to sinfulness and in a common fate for the majority of sinners’.  

How this awareness of innate human depravity and its social consequences relates to what might be conceptualised as criminality, at a time when crime, according to modern historians, was becoming classified as a major social problem is a question that, in different ways, troubles these plays.

While England at the turn of the seventeenth century was an established Protestant state, prevailing attitudes towards sin, crime and punishment had taken shape over a long period and did not necessarily or directly reflect the changes in religious beliefs and practices imposed by the Church during a time of extraordinary religious turbulence. The order was indeed Protestant, and the sense of human nature as innately and helplessly sinful was a Calvinist emphasis, but the belief system itself was transitional, and conceptions such as providentialism that are fundamental to the moral structure of these plays did not originate with the Reformation. Alexandra Walsham emphasises that the discourse of providence was not ‘a monopoly of the hotter sort of Protestants’ but ‘a cluster of assumptions which had long been part of the machinery of pre-Reformation minds’.  

The homiletic component in these plays, traceable as it may be through their narratives of contemporary life, is not simply an expression of orthodox doctrine.

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7 Ibid, 109.

The recent critical turn to the material in accounts of early modern drama has benefitted domestic tragedy considerably, illuminating its special relation to the society of its time, in particular its handling of the house and the household, their spaces, relationships and practices, in terms which would have been familiar to its audiences. Building on such insights into the domestic I return to the moral and affective, to the chaos and disorder in the home which is at the heart of these plays. It results from an act that is sinful, criminal, or both, and it is presented so as to bring about a certain emotional reaction in the audience, one conditioned by the audience’s recognition of an affinity between their own circumstances and those of the protagonists. Hamlet’s formulation of this idea about ‘guilty creatures sitting at a play’ (2.2.524-8) is familiar.\(^9\) A more specific application of it appeared earlier, in *A Warning for Fair Women* (c.1597), when Master James recounts an anecdote to illustrate the maxim that ‘murder will out’:

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\begin{align*}
A \text{ woman that had made away her husband,} \\
\text{And sitting to behold a tragedy} \\
\text{At Linne a town in Norffolke,} \\
\text{Acted by Players travelling that way,} \\
\text{Wherein a woman that had murtherd hers} \\
\text{Was ever haunted with her husbands ghost:} \\
\text{The passion written by a feeling pen,} \\
\text{And acted by a good Tragedian,} \\
\text{She was so mooved with the sight thereof,} \\
\text{As she cryed out, the play was made by her,} \\
\text{And openly confessst her husbands murder (2037-48).}^{10}\n\end{align*}
\]

That theatrical performances might be put to moral uses was of course a major argument for those who sought to counter anti-theatrical polemics.\(^{11}\) It also spoke for the part played by the practitioners’ skill: it takes ‘a good tragedian’ and a ‘feeling pen’ to create ‘the very cunning of the scene’ and bring about the desired effect. But not all audiences consist of murderers, and there is a broader appeal which stems from the plays’ particular form of moral structuring that engages the audience’s emotions. Henry Hitch Adams’s book, *English Domestic or, Homiletic Tragedy* (1943) which was ground-breaking in its time, takes a specific line on this, and its primary thesis has been subject to some

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\(^{9}\) Quotations from *Hamlet* are taken from the Arden Shakespeare revised edition by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury, 2016)

\(^{10}\) Quotations from *A Warning for Fair Women* are taken from the edition by Charles Dale Cannon (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), which has continuous line numbering.

\(^{11}\) The incident of the woman at Lynn is also recounted in Heywood’s *Apology for Actors* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1612) where more detail is given (sig. G1v-G2v).
development; more recently, however, critics have been eager to demonstrate how constrictive is the homiletic framework proposed. Yet, while I do not wish to ignore the very considerable differences between the stagecraft of the plays, the place of homiletic elements in all of them cannot be denied, and I want to consider how they operate in relation to the contemporary conceptualisation of sin and of crime, forming a nexus where what is contemporary and contingent comes to terms with what is deemed eternal and immutable.

The domestic tragedies I discuss focus on a sinful act that usually takes the form of a crime, and through it the perpetrator becomes subject to human as well as divine justice. This is one factor that connects them as a group; another is their concern for the ‘simple truth’ of ‘home-borned Tragedie’. Popular non-dramatic accounts of crime in the period, such as, for example, the source materials of A Warning for Fair Women or A Yorkshire Tragedy, share a two-fold moral focus: on human weakness and propensity to sin, and on the imminence of divine judgment on a fallen world. The notion of crime as an act defined and punishable by law did not exist as such and the term is rarely differentiated from sin. Preachers write of ‘the crime of original sinne’, and call adultery ‘a notorious crime and a horrible abomination’ and perjury ‘an heinous sinne and capital crime’. The Ghost in Hamlet is confined to fast in fires ‘till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purg’d away’ (1.5.12-13). Examples are legion, and indeed the first definition of crime in the OED is sin, the most common sense in the early modern period. The conflation of sin and crime has certain consequences for the construction of the criminal. On the one hand, he or she may be an ordinary member of society whose criminal career resulted from following a progressive course of sinful conduct beginning with minor acts of wrong-doing; the notion of what Adams terms the ‘chain of vice’ was common, and Tragedy in A Warning for Fair Women uses it to describe the fall of George Browne and Anne Sanders into irrevocable wickedness:

   Prevailing Sinne having by three degrees,
   Made his ascension to forbidden deedes
   At first, alluring their unwary mindes

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13 These phrases are spoken by Franklin in the Epilogue to Arden of Faversham and Tragedy in the Epilogue to A Warning to Fair Women, respectively.
14 The references are to John Hull, The Unmasking of the Politique Atheist (London: Ralph Howell, 1602), p. 12, and John Downname, Four treatises tending to disswade all Christians from foure no less heinous than common sinnes (London: William Welby, 1609), pp. 80, 72.
15 Adams, p. 118.
To like what she proposde, then practising
To draw them to consent: and last of all
Ministring fit meanes and opportunitie
To execute what she approved good. (1782-88)

One moral lapse leads inevitably to another, and ‘prevailing sin’ takes hold of the human will. ‘As we forsake God, so shall he ever forsake us’. A murder pamphlet by John Taylor, *The Unnatural Father* (1621), begins with an expression of this idea:

As a chaine consists of divers linkes, and every linke depends and is inyoak’d upon one another: Even so our sinnes, being the chaine where with Satan doth binde and manacle us, are so knit, twisted, and sodered together, that without our firme faith ascending, and Gods grace descending, wee can never bee freed from those infernall fetters; for Sloth is linked with Drunkennes, Drunkennes with Fornication and Adultery, & Adultery with Murder, and so of al the rest of the temptations, suggestions and actions wherewith miserable men and women are insnared, and led captive unto perpetual perdition, except the mercy of our gracious God be our defence and safeguard.

By contrast with this idea of the criminal as the typical sinner who cannot resist the impulses of his fallen nature is that of the exceptional individual, so extraordinarily and inexplicably wicked that he or she can only be described as a monster, taken over by diabolic forces. The question of responsibility for the crime, at least in the legal sense, is entirely sidestepped. This notion lends itself less readily to dramatisation but it is not absent from domestic tragedy. These plays explore what Tragedy terms ‘forbidden deeds’, their causes and their consequences, enacted in a world where natural and supernatural explanations are not alternatives but part of ‘a common intellectual system’. Adams’s concern to locate this action within a homiletic pattern derived from morality plays ends up by sidelining the natural, regarding what he calls ‘the elements of realism’, which have been the main interest of most recent critics, as simply reinforcement of the moral lesson to be absorbed by audiences struck by the similarity of

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16 From *Certain Sermons or Homilies appointed to be read in church* (1562), ed. by John Griffiths (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1864), p. 84.
these dramatic worlds to their own. But the interrelation of the homiletic and the socio-ethical is more complex and more interesting than this, and the relationship between sin and crime comes into focus here.

*Arden of Faversham*, although the earliest of this group, has none of the morality play trappings that feature in *A Warning for Fair Women* and *Two Lamentable Tragedies*, or the overtly supernatural moments in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and *A Woman Killed by Kindness*. The impetus behind the writing of the play, which dramatises an event of almost 40 years earlier, may well have been the publication in 1587 of the second edition of Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, with its suggestive marginal comments. The play is self-conscious about its post-Reformation context, which is mentioned at the very beginning in Franklin’s reference to Arden’s acquisition of ‘all the lands of the Abbey of Faversham’. These lands are to prove troublesome to Arden; his right to them is questioned by Mosby (1.292-7), disputed by Greene, who believes that Arden has wrung from him ‘what little land I have’ (1.471), and challenged outright by Richard Reede, a character who makes a single appearance just in order to do this. He confronts Arden with misappropriation of his land, and Arden dismisses him scornfully, threatening him with prison. Reede then pronounces a solemn curse on Arden, invoking God to ‘show some miracle / On thee or thine, in plaguing thee for this’ (13.30-1). He continues:

That plot of ground which thou detains from me -  
I speak it in an agony of spirit –  
Be ruinous and fatal unto thee!  
Either there be butched by thy dearest friends,  
Or else be brought for men to wonder at. (13.33-7)

Reede’s words resonate strongly and his prophecy is fulfilled, as Franklin emphasises in his Epilogue, connecting Arden’s seizure of Reede’s land with the fact (taken from Holinshed’s account) ‘above the rest to be noted’, that ‘his body's print’ was seen in the grass of that plot of land for two years after his murder. In this quasi-miraculous occurrence, as well as the apparently ineradicable quality of the murdered Arden’s blood, the play appears to illustrate Adams’s notion of a homiletic structure, but I would argue that the handling of sin and punishment is more complicated than this, sometimes even working to subvert it.

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21 Holinshed explains his inclusion of an ‘private matter’, apparently ‘impertinent’ to his history because of its ‘horribleness’. His account of the story is included in the edition by M. L. Wine (*The Revels Plays, London: Methuen, 1973*), Appendix II. My quotations from the play are taken from this edition.
Religious discourse implicitly suffuses the language of all the characters, irrespective of their moral status, along with, in many cases, an overt disavowal of moral and religious norms. Alice repines at the ties of marriage and the ‘rites’ that bind her to Arden; although she has ‘given [my] hand to him in the church’ marriage vows are meaningless to her:

Tush, Mosby! Oaths are words, and words is wind,
And wind is mutable. Then, I conclude,
’Tis childishness to stand upon an oath. (1.436-8)

Trying to placate Mosby, who in a quarrel has called her ‘unhallowed’, she offers to commit sacrilege:

I will do penance for offending thee,
And burn this prayerbook, where I here use
The holy word that had converted me.
See, Mosby, I will tear away the leaves,
And all the leaves, and in this golden cover
Shall thy sweet phrases and thy letters dwell;
And thereon will I chiefly meditate
And hold no other sect but such devotion. (8.115-22)

The act of tearing out the pages and replacing them with love letters, to which she will do ‘devotion’, may appear shockingly blasphemous, but the prayerbook itself is an ambiguous item, perhaps intimating Protestant piety, or alternatively recalling the Catholic past. In 1549 an Act for the Abolishing and Putting Away of Divers Books and Images had been passed, in attempt to get rid of Catholic religious books and missals. According to the climate of the times, the burning of religious books might be impiety or conformity. Alice’s idea of penance is ironic, as is Black Will’s, when he forgives Michael for failing to do his part in an attempt on Arden: ‘Then, Michael this shall be your penance, / To feast us all at the Salutation’ (7.24-5). Later Arden, ridiculously begging Alice’s forgiveness for challenging Mosby, begs ‘Impose me penance, and I will perform it’ (13.119). The religious and moral discourse surrounding Arden reflects his compromised moral status. Michael, having agreed to assist Black Will and Shakebag in one of the many attempts on Arden, has a fit of conscience and imagines ‘harmless’ Arden as a lamb innocently feeding in the sight of a ‘hunger-bitten wolf’, whom he will lead to the slaughterhouse (3.192-204), although he quickly subdues his feelings of compassion.

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22 This is discussed in Elizabeth Williamson, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Prayer Book Properties in Hamlet, Richard III and Arden of Faversham’, ELR 39.2 (2009), 371-95 (p. 373).
But for Greene and Reede Arden is devious and avaricious: ‘Desire of wealth is endless in his mind / And he is greedy-gaping still for gain’, claims Greene (1.474-5). He ‘hoards up bags of gold’, says Alice (1.220). Arden’s legalistic defences of his recently granted rights of ownership of the Abbey lands, his power and class consciousness (‘I am by birth a gentleman of blood’ [1.36]) are implicitly juxtaposed against the moral rights of smaller people to their livelihood.

Mosby’s use of religious language acknowledges its power yet denies this power any meaning for himself. Drawing on Calvinist doctrine he vows hypocritically to Arden to abandon his pursuit of Alice: ‘As I intend to live / With God and His elected saints in Heaven, / I never meant more to solicit her’ (1.326-8). And moments before Arden’s murder he claims boldly:

Yet, Arden, I protest to thee by heaven,
Thou ne’er shalt see me more after this night.
I’ll go to Rome rather than be forsworn. (14.214-16)

This avowal is a slightly different matter since Mosby genuinely intends this to be his last sight of Arden, but the promise to ‘go to Rome’ is perhaps analogous to Lady Macbeth’s readiness to kill her suckling baby – a promise made on radical terms to indicate there is no possibility of its fulfilment. Elsewhere Mosby appears more orthodox in his religious attitude. He is at first angered when Alice informs Greene openly of the plot they have made to kill Arden, but when Alice assures him that Greene is religious, ‘A man.. of great devotion’ (1.586), he is mollified, taking it to mean that Greene will keep their counsel, albeit in a murder plot. But what religion really means for Green is exposed in a further moment of irony in scene 9 when, after Arden is once again saved from death by the unexpected appearance of Lord Cheiny, he exclaims angrily at Arden’s escape, ‘The Lord of Heaven hath preserved him’. Black Will responds, ‘The Lord of Heaven a fig! The Lord Cheiny hath preserved him’ (9. 142-4). The cynicism with which Shakebag comments on Arden’s ‘wondrous holy luck’ (9. 134) or Black Will bemoans his ineptitude in despatching him – ‘doubtless, he is preserved by miracle’ (14.28) – invokes the role of providence with parodic effect. The religious discourse of the play is regularly compromised. Black Will appears to be a boldly unrepentant villain, with an extensive criminal career behind him, but although he claims to have ‘broken five hundred oaths’ (3.90), he will still go through the motions of making a sacred vow, even if it is to commit a murder (9.38) where, according to the stage direction, ‘he kneels down and holds up his hands to Heaven’.
No character in *Arden of Faversham* is without moral culpability or free of criminal responsibility. The concluding scenes after the murder seem to prepare for an orthodox homiletic conclusion whereby the discovery is providentially revealed (the footprints in the snow, the blood stains), the protagonist’s guilt miraculously displayed by the blood which gushes from the corpse in her presence, and the main characters overcome with remorse. Alice brushes off intrusions into her private world of repentance:

> Leave now to trouble me with worldly things  
> And let me meditate upon my Saviour Christ  
> Whose blood must save me for the blood I shed. (18.9-11).

And finally, Franklin’s Epilogue, tonally discrete from the rest of the play as it is, appears to be there to tie up the loose ends. Yet there is much to compromise such closure. Even if those who are arguably the worst criminals, Black Will and Shakebag, come to bad ends, as Franklin tells, in their last appearances they are at large, without remorse, and preparing to continue their careers of crime elsewhere. Shakebag relates dispassionately how he has dealt with a former mistress:

> And, as she followed me, I spurned her down the stairs  
> And broke her neck, and cut her tapster’s throat;  
> And now I am going to fling them in the Thames. (15.8-10)

Along with Black Will he brings to the play a commitment to criminality untroubled by any consciousness of sin, and effectively comic in its relish of sordid detail. Clarke, the painter who has been involved in the conspiracy and even offered, albeit reluctantly, to make a poisoned crucifix, simply disappears ‘and how he died we know not’ (Epilogue, 8). But by contrast the list of those to be executed for the murder includes Bradshaw, who had no involvement in it all; he tries to attract Alice’s attention to his predicament, but she rebuffs him in her wish to focus on her own salvation. A comparison with the next domestic tragedy, *A Warning for Fair Women*, makes clear how different, and how unorthodox, *Arden* is in its handling of sin and crime.

*A Warning for Fair Women*, printed in 1599 and based on earlier accounts of a crime committed in 1573, is also a story of adultery and husband murder, in which the wife, her lover and other accomplices are involved. Unlike *Arden*, it quite readily fits into the typical structure of ‘sin, discovery, repentance, punishment, and expectation of divine
mercy’. Its hybrid dramaturgy, aptly styled ‘a wedding between Senecan tragedy and the native moral play’ by Madeleine Doran, is based on the regular interspersing of lurid dumbshows featuring figures such as Lust and Chastity interacting with the principal characters, accompanied by commentary from the personified figure of Tragedy, with scenes of dramatised action depicting the circumstances that lead up to the murder of the husband, Master Sanders, and its consequences. The dumbshows, along with Tragedy’s interpretations, clearly direct the audience in its moral response to the spectacle. The overtly edificatory tone is sustained by addresses to the audience by the characters; Browne, desperately borrowing money to make his escape after the murder, regrets his crime and adds a warning:

This heate of love and hasty climbing breeds,
God blesse all honest tall men from such deedes. (ll. 1780-1)

He goes to his death, leaping off the scaffold onstage, with the words

All carelesse men, be warned by my end,
And by my fall your wicked lives amend. (ll. 2478-9)

Anne Sanders, penitent in the moments before her death, delivers a short homily to her children, to ‘learne by your mother’s fall, / To follow vertue, and beware of sinne’ (ll. 2686-7), that is clearly meant for the wider edification of the audience.

The play is heavily influenced by its major source, Arthur Golding’s *A brief discourse of the late murder of master George Sanders* (1573), the work of a puritan of Calvinist persuasion who shaped his account to bring out particular emphases: on human depravity, the role of God’s providence and the power of contrition and confession. Golding’s major themes are all evident in the play, and the central sin of lust is personified. After the first dumbshow, a banquet for the main characters, presided over by the Furies, at which Lust vanquishes Chastity, and Anne Sanders is proactive – ‘She thrusteth Chastity from her; Chastity wrings her hands, and departs’ – Tragedy interprets:

Thus sinne prevails, she drinkes that poysoned draught,
With which base thoughts henceforth infects her soule,
And wins her free consent to this foule deed.
Now bloud and Lust, doth conquer and subdue,
And Chastitie is quite abandoned:
Here enters Murther into al their hearts,
And doth possess them with the hellish thirst
Of guiltlesse blood. (ll. 835-42)

While the play makes a direct relationship between sin and crime which enables a straightforwardly providential reading of the events, the anonymous playwright’s interests clearly extend further. Golding’s main concern in his pamphlet is to depict the spiritual education of Anne Sanders and George Browne, along with the conniving widow Anne Drury and her man Roger, all of them ‘very rawe and ignorant in all things perteyning to God and their soule[s] health’.25 While the playwright shapes this narrative into the climax of his play, his build-up to it brings many other factors to bear, and reveals other possible meanings of the sequence of events.

The events leading up to the murder of George Sanders take place in a world made socially and geographically familiar to the audience. ‘My Scene is London, native and your owne’, announces Tragedy. In contrast with the abstract settings of the dumbshows, the action is located in a recognisable contemporary social environment, when chat about the difficult situation in Ireland is current, Sanders, a well-to-do city merchant, discusses bills and bonds and cash flow problems with his man, and his wife makes fashionable purchases, perfumed gloves and an Italian purse, from a draper and a milliner, who visit her at home. The Sanders house is precisely situated: ‘Against St Dunstones church’ says Drury when Browne questions her, and elaborates ‘neere Billingsgate, / St Dunstones in the east’ (ll. 302-5). Sanders’s work takes him on journeys around London and its environs; Roger describes following him from Cornhill ‘where he staied / An hower talking in a marchants warehouse’, then ‘went directly to the Burse’ and after coming home to midday dinner travelled to Lion Quay, then taking a boat to Greenwich. He is murdered near Shooters’ Hill.

George Browne’s desire for Anne Sanders is announced without preamble, and he relies on Anne Drury assisted by Roger to help him fulfil it. Drury raises her price for procuring by stressing Anne Sanders’s chastity and Sanders’s devotion to her – ‘What sin it were to doe him then that wrong?’ (l. 517). She is a key figure in Anne’s seduction, but it is not achieved solely by her machinations. Her reputation as a wise woman, acclaimed for

25 Golding’s pamphlet is reprinted as Appendix D in Cannon’s edition; quotation taken from p. 223.
‘matchlesse skil in palmestrie’ (l. 692), is important (and perhaps suspect in Protestant
eyes), and Anne’s evidently superstitious nature makes her readily susceptible to Drury’s
persuasions. But it is the chance of a domestic embarrassment for Anne, over the lack of
ready cash to pay tradesmen and consequent loss of face in their eyes, that gives Drury
her opportunity. Anne regards the annoyance as her ‘destiny’, foretold by the appearance
of yellow spots on her fingers; Drury seizes on this to read Anne’s palm and predict that
she is shortly due to be widowed and then to remarry ‘one of great estates’. Anne is
reluctant to embrace this fortune, but Drury easily persuades her.

ANNE: Yet had I rather be as now I am,
If God were pleased that it should be so.

DRURY: I marrie now you speak like a good Christian,
If God were pleased: O but he hath decreed
It shalbe otherwise, and to repine
Against his providence you know tis sinne. (ll. 715-20)

Drury’s co-option of providentialism is a cynical but effective ploy, and Anne readily
prepares herself for ‘that which God and destenie sets downe’ (l. 756) According to
Tragedy, she is a ‘poor deluded soule, / Attended by unspotted Innocence’ (ll. 820-1)
until Drury, ‘that accursed fiend’, gets to work on her; in the realistic scenes she is never
shown as even interested in Browne, let alone involved in any conspiracy to do away with
her husband, but in the dumbshows she is drawn inexorably into collusion.

Browne, egged on by Drury and her sidekick Roger, only manages to despatch Sanders
after several attempts, thwarted by ‘accidents strange and miraculous’ (l. 1247). But even
before Sanders’s luck has run out, Browne is possessed by a strong sense of guilt, and
immediately after the killing he is overcome by conscience. The dying Sanders, in pious
Christian style, asks for divine forgiveness for his own sins and for those of his murderer.
Browne cries out

O sinne how hast thou blinded me til now,
Promising me securitie and rest,
But givest me dreadful agonie of soule? (ll. 1397-9)

Consciousness of sin torments him continually, and Anne, in receipt of the handkerchief
he has sent her, dipped in her husband’s blood, is equally possessed with guilt. She feels
herself found out by God: ‘He heard our trecherie... Our hainous sinne cries in the ears of
him ... A womans sinne, a wives inconstancie’ (ll. 1551-6). Unlike those in Arden, the
guilty characters are punished for their crimes by their own internal suffering well before
the processes of the law get to work. The discovery of the murder is in part providential, and the amazing survival, ‘past belief’ (l. 1917) of the fatally wounded servant John Beane, who lives on, speechless for two days, only to confirm Browne’s identity at the point of death, is central to this. But the legal processes by which Browne is identified, discovered, arrested, tried and found guilty are not neglected and they fill out the last third of the play; the role of the state in also determining the fates of Anne Sanders, Drury and Roger is part of this. The playwright is concerned not just with the punishment for sin but also with what Malcolm Gaskill calls ‘the triangular relationship between God, man and the law’. The involvement of the state in bringing about justice and restoring order is extensively demonstrated in the scenes depicting the Mayor of Rochester, Master James, the sheriff, the court of King’s Bench and other legal officials, which testify to an interest in court room procedure. The formal indictments against Browne and the rest are read out, and the judgments given. Browne is taken to execution and makes his scaffold speech; his execution seems to be depicted onstage. ‘He leapes off’, according to the stage direction.

What gives these final scenes dramatic tension is the interplay between crime and sin in the handling of Anne Sanders’s fate. In court the Lord Justice rejects her protestations of innocence and finds her guilty:

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\text{tis no pettie sin} \\
\text{But murder most unnatural of al,} \\
\text{Wherewith your hands are tainted, and in which,} \\
\text{Before and after the accursed fact,} \\
\text{You stand as accessarie. (ll. 2362-6)}
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A legal point is made here: the crime of husband murder was accounted petty treason and hence punishable by burning, but because Anne is adjudged only an accessory she will be hanged with the rest. Even so, she continues to protest her innocence, and Browne, in his otherwise very full confession, asserts that she is ‘guiltless of the fact’. He knows otherwise, and thus denies himself the ‘true and certain testimonie’ (ll. 2431) that is necessary for divine forgiveness and salvation. It is appropriate that despite his expressed wish to the contrary, his corpse is to be ‘hung up in Chains’ at the site of the murder. He is not alone in his wish to exculpate Anne; the minister who attends her in prison (and wishes to marry her) also pleads on her behalf. Despite evidence against her on both the legal and the emblematic levels (the white rose turning to red in court) Anne persists in her denial to the last minute. Even the hardened sinner Drury is determined to clear her

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26 Gaskill, p. 238.
conscience and make her peace with God before death. She tells Anne to leave dissembling:

   We have bin both notorious vile transgressors,  
   And this is not the way to get remission,  
   By joyning sinne to sinne. (ll. 2581-3)

In the language of the prayer book she urges Anne to offer up the full confession required to save her soul, and open her heart to the holy spirit so as to win ‘the endlesse joyes of heaven’. Anne now finds herself ‘strangely chan
ged’, confesses her sins including that of denying her guilt, and thanks God for who has ‘brought me to affliction in this world, / Thereby to save me in the world to come’ (ll. 2684-5). Justice is thereby seen to be done, both legally and spiritually, and even if the final stress is on the latter, legal processes reinforce God’s providence to complete the retribution that Tragedy demands: ‘Measure for measure, and lost bloud for bloud’ (l. 1829).

Like A Warning for Fair Women, Two Lamentable Tragedies, by the otherwise unknown Robert Yarington (1601) was based on a recent crime, the murder of Robert Beech and his young servant, Thomas Winchester, by Thomas Merry, in London in 1594. It too is a hybrid play in form, using personifications (though not dumbsho
ts) for overt moralising, and combining the allegorical with the detail of contemporary London life to make the appeal of familiarity to the audience, particularly in its depiction of a working class milieu; Merry is a tavern keeper, Beech a chandler and the other characters consist mostly of watermen, porters, watchmen, and maidservants. The sin explored here is Avarice, personified along with Homicide. One can infer that Yarington felt a need to enhance the dramatic interest of it; the personification constantly emphasises its fellowship with the bloodthirsty Homicide, who praises Avarice for its wide-reaching social effects:

   where thou art let in,  
   There is no scrupule made of any sinne,  
   The world may see thou art the roote of ill (sig. C3)²⁷

A second plot, set in Italy and also involving murder for financial gain, is developed in parallel with the London plot. It not only enriches the treatment of avarice and highlights the role of family relations in the London plot, but also enlarges the understanding of sin.

²⁷ Quotations from Two Lamentable Tragedies are taken from the facsimile edition by Chiaki Hanabusa for the Malone Society, vol. 180 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
The crime in the London plot is staged early. Merry introduces himself in the first scene as one ‘in meane and discontented state’ although he has no reason to be so, since

I am belov’d, I have a pretty house,
A loving sister, and a careful man,
That doe not thinke their dayes worke well at end
Except it bring me in some benefit. (sig. A3v)

Yet Merry is jealous of his neighbour Beech, his antithesis in being contented with his social condition and inclined rather to count his blessings, including ‘a score of poundes to helpe my neede’, than wish them larger. Merry plans at once to rob Beech, not concerned that he may have to kill him to do so. This he does at his next appearance, admitting to some scruples – ‘My conscience saith it is a damned deed’ – but promptly dismissing them: ‘Peace, conscience, peace, thou art too scrupulous’ (sigs. B3-B3v). The murder is particularly violent, Merry striking Beech on the head with a hammer fifteen times, and immediately discovered by Merry’s sister Rachel and his man Harry Williams. In the Italian plot the murder, of a child at the command of his uncle who hopes to gain the boy’s inheritance, is delayed till later in the play. The uncle Fallerio proudly declares himself a villain to the two hired murderers; discarding what he calls ‘the seeming semblances, / Of equal justice, and true pietie’, he bares open his ‘hearts corrupted Cytadell’ and his mind full of ‘falshood, crueltie, / Blood sucking Avarice, and all the sinnes’ (sig. D1). While Fallerio rejoices in his wickedness, in no time at all Merry is beset by ‘grim visagd despair [which] / Hath tane possession of my guiltie heart’ and aware that God knows and will revenge his wickedness. By staging this crime so early in the play, Yarington never allows the perpetrator to enjoy any of the fruits of it, but instead gives scope for the expression of the torments of guilt, but more importantly the complications arising from the involvement of the two accessories Rachel and Harry Williams, and the detailed process of detection. The material facts of the murder are foregrounded here. Merry must deal with the corpse, and the logistics of disposing of the body, which is dismembered and its parts distributed around London, are problematic. In addition Merry must also kill Beech’s servant, Thomas Winchester, who is in a position to accuse him, and the noisy and bungled killing, again bloody and violent, arouses the attention of the neighbours, who raise a hue and cry. The murder weapon, again a hammer, this time sticks in the victim’s head, and the neighbours will not allow it to be removed ‘Because the crowner and his quest may see / The manner how he did receive his death’, and so the judicial process of discovering the full extent of Merry’s crime begins. The community is fully involved; neighbours go round asking questions, two Thames watermen discover a sack containing a leg and a head, which Beech’s landlord
identifies, a playful dog finds the torso on Paris Garden ditch, and so on. The law takes its course.

Merry evades justice for a time, partly because of his reputation; as Rachel says, he is considered ‘an honest harmlesse man’ by his neighbours (G3v). He also relies on the loyalty of Harry Williams who keeps his secret, although uneasy and aware that eventually ‘God will revenge this damn’d iniquitie’ (sig. C1). But key to his ability to hold out is Rachel, who, despite her horror at the crime, gives practical assistance with clearing up the blood and disposing of the body, and also attempts to console him. She is painfully conscious of her familial duty: ‘I am your sister, though a silly Maide, / Ile be your true and faithfull comforter’, she tells him (D2v). She keeps her word, but in a brief soliloquy later reveals her heart:

I feare thy soule will burne in flames of hell,  
Unlesse repentance wash away thy sinne,  
With clensing teares of true contrition:  
Ah did not nature oversway my will,  
The world should know this plot of damned ill. (sigs. E2v-E3)

As in A Warning for Fair Women, the contrition and repentance of the guilty is vital to the play’s homiletic conclusion, and indeed Merry is given a full, textbook style confessional speech on the scaffold, noting the power of Christ’s blood to wipe away his sins, his hope for divine mercy, his desire to forgive and be forgiven, his wish to be ‘crown’d with immortallitie’ and so on (sigs. K1v-2). While his career of crime demonstrates that it doesn’t pay, what is ultimately most important is his identity as a repentant sinner in hope of heaven. But the involvement of Rachel and Williams in Merry’s crime raises a question about its relation to sin. Williams is actually the one who gives the game away; urged by his friend Cowley to ‘ease your hart of horror’ because concealing knowledge of a crime will mean incurring ‘the danger of the lawe’, he unintentionally mentions his master. This slip of the tongue he ascribes to God’s providence, because ‘what the lord doth please shall come to light, / Cannot be hid by humaine pollicie’ (sig. H4). ‘If I offended, ’twas my Maisters love, / That made me hide his great transgressions’, he adds. But in the eyes of the law this is not an extenuating circumstance, and he is condemned to death for ‘concealment’. So is Rachel, whose case may appear stronger, although she is aware of her failing in allowing ‘nature’ to ‘oversway her will’. This idea of nature has been subject to discussion, and differently interpreted.28 It also figures in the Italian plot, where Allenso, the innocent son of the

28 Clark, pp. 132-3.
villain Fallerio, comes up with a plan to disguise himself as his father in order to help him escape the law. Fallerio is impressed by his son’s devotion: ‘This care of thine my sonne doth testifie, / Nature in thee hath firme predominance’ (sig. H2v). The plan does not work, and both father and son are condemned to death, even though Allenso has played no part at all in the murder. Allenso does not repine at his fate. The Duke of Padua commands the executions, adding an order to ‘use Allenso with all clemencie: / Provided that the lawe be satisfied’. Fallerio’s wry comment, ‘Here is a mercie mixt with equitie, / To shewe him favour, but cut off his head’ (sig. I4v), is only followed up in Fallerio’s last words to his son, that he was never disobedient ‘Unlesse I did commaund unlawfulnesse’. Nature and law make different and contradictory demands. In the London plot there is some unease around Rachel’s fate. Truth in his summary of the sentences distinguishes between Williams, who by virtue of craving ‘the book’, ‘receives a brond of infamie’ but not capital punishment, and Rachel:

But wretched Rachels sexe denies that grace,
And therefore dooth receive a doome of death,
To dye with him whose sinnes she did conceale. (sig. I 2v)

Rachel, who has witnessed her brother’s onstage execution, and as the stage direction notes, ‘shrinketh’ at the sight, is given the final scaffold speech, after her brother; although she asks that her fate be a lesson to sisters not to conceal their brothers’ wicked deeds, she adds that she does not repent of her love for Merry, only that ‘thereby I have provoked God, / To heavy wrath and indignation’; she goes on to blame Williams for not coming clean early on, so that ‘the boy had liv’d, and thou hadst sav’d my life’. The contradictions here are not resolved. The values of religious faith are sufficient for Merry in his contrition, and the law is just; in Williams’s case the law is merciful. But Rachel’s unexpected attack on Williams implies something unreconciled in her attitude towards her death; and the gap between the values that command her loyalty to her brother and God’s moral law is exposed: did she (like Allenso, in his effort to protect his father) commit a sin, or only a crime?

A Woman Killed with Kindness (1603) by Thomas Heywood, is the only domestic tragedy not to have its main plot based on a real life story, and its handling of crime differs significantly from that in the other plays, though, like Two Lamentable Tragedies, it prioritises sin. A killing does occur in the subplot where Sir Charles Mountford, in an angry altercation with Sir Francis Acton while hawking, kills two of his men; but this is no secret homicide, the killer is immediately remorseful, pays compensation, and is
spared ‘the law’s strict penalty’ (2.2.3); his subsequent role in the play is as victim of the vindictive measures taken by Acton, not satisfied by the actions of the law. The woman who is ‘killed’ is an adulteress, Anne Frankford, sister to Acton; her adultery is a crime against God’s law, which, while punishable by the shaming rituals prescribed in the church courts, is not a capital crime in law. Her husband, John Frankford, is ‘kind’ to her by forbearing to kill either her or her lover, and by not demanding her public penance. His refraining from murder is not presented as an act of volition. He pursues the guilty Wendoll, making an escape in his night gown, over the stage, but is prevented from using his drawn sword by a ‘Maid in her smock [who] stays his hand, and clasps hold on him’. He acknowledges her silent (and fleeting) presence:

I thank thee, maid; thou like the angel’s hand
Hast stay’d me from a bloody sacrifice. (4.4.66-7)

While not signalled as a providential intervention, the Maid’s action saves Frankford from committing murder (although, perhaps implying the averted sacrifice of Isaac, he calls it a sacrifice). This moment, as Frankford interprets it, appears to be the only overtly non-naturalistic one in the play, which is otherwise largely without morality trappings and even lacks a summarising epilogue. But it nonetheless exists as part of a homiletic structure whereby the narrative of adultery in a contemporary household takes on larger meanings. Biblical references link Wendoll with Satan in his corruption of Eve (2.3.179); Frankford, betrayed by the friend to whom he has given the freedom of his house, calls him ‘that Judas that hath borne my purse / And sold me for a sin’ (3.2.103-4), and imagines him ‘Judas-like hang’d on an elder tree’. Wendoll calls himself ‘a Cain’, who must go abroad into exile. Anne, caught by her husband, is fully conscious of the enormity of her sin; she feels herself unworthy even to beg his pardon: ‘I am as far from hoping such sweet grace / As Lucifer from heaven’ (4.4.78-9). The religious overlay is clear and explicit. Anne’s spiritual agony is figured in the violently physical language of judicial torture:

Oh, to redeem my honour,
I would have this hand cut off, these my breasts sear’d,
Be rack’d, strappado’d, put to any torment; (4.4.131-3)

A moment later she presents herself to the audience as a moral exemplum:

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Oh, women, women, you that have yet kept
Your holy matrimonial vow unstain’d,
Make me your instance when you tread awry;
Your sins like mine will on your conscience lie. (4.4.140-3)

Frankford’s punishment, paradoxically expressed, is ‘with usage of . . . humility to torment thy soul, / And kill thee, even with kindness’ (4.4.153-5), by banishing her from the household and family she has desecrated, eradicating all traces of her presence, and ordering her to live out her days without any contact with him or her children. Gladly accepting this punishment, she enhances it by a self-inflicted regime of starvation. Fully penitent, she finds herself on her deathbed finally able to beg her husband’s pardon, which, explicitly Christ-like, he gives her:

As freely from the low depth of my soul
As my Redeemer hath forgiven His death,
I pardon thee. (5.4.93-5)

He accepts her again as his wife, and restores to her the domestic identities she lost. What Orlin calls her ‘profound and life-saving repentance’ in these final moments equates to the last repentance and confession of the criminal on the scaffold, assuring her of divine salvation.

Diana Henderson, following Adams, reads the play’s main plot as a morality drama tracing ‘the Christian movement of fall from Edenic bliss into sin, allowing a spiritual homecoming only after sacrifice’. Such a pattern may shadow the action at one level, but the fully realised social context within which it is played out introduces other meanings. Frankford’s orderly and well-appointed household is constructed of a network of relationships, which are dislocated by Wendoll’s entry into it. Frankford’s excessively generous treatment of his friend, another sort of ‘kindness’, even if it is in line with the hospitality expected of a gentleman such as Frankford, paves the way for, almost enables, Wendoll’s abuse of it, and leaves Frankford open to the charge of partial responsibility. The servant Nicholas can perceive a threat to the household in Wendoll’s presence, but Frankford is blind to it. He may seem to his brother ‘too mild’ of spirit in foregoing revenge on his adulterous wife, but his action is not without self-interest: it is an assertion

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of moral authority which preserves his honour and clears him of the cuckold’s shame. He figures finally as a quasi-priestlike figure, both forgiving and pardoning Anne’s sins, but although Heywood is less willing than the author of Arden of Faversham to complicate the role of the wronged husband, there is some moral loss to the play unless he is also realised as the early modern householder and husband not without culpability for the breakdown of his family.

A Yorkshire Tragedy, printed in 1608, is a true-life crime story closely based on a pamphlet, Two Most Unnatural and Bloodie Murthers (1605), which was published soon after the sensational events described (and probably before the perpetrator met his death). It comes as something of an appendix after the other plays. Changes were made from the source by the playwright (perhaps Middleton), partly dictated perhaps by the need not to antagonise the influential families involved, giving the play a totally different character from any of the others. The characters are anonymised, the local setting absent, and the motivation of the Husband for his savage treatment of his wife and children never expressed, even emblematically. In the actual case, the husband, Walter Calverley, the eldest son of an old and well-regarded Catholic gentry family, was expected to marry his guardian’s niece, but went to London and married another woman, also well connected, but with a smaller dowry. The first woman fell ill with misery when she found out. He had money worries, was imprisoned in the Fleet for debt, and forced to mortgage his lands.32 There is a brief allusion in the first scene of A Yorkshire Tragedy to the ‘young mistress’ who bewails the absence of her lover, not knowing that he is married ‘long ago’, and has fathered several children, but no connection is made with the rest of the play. The Yorkshire Tragedy strips away such elements of domestic tragedy such as the context in the social and material life of its time, and the build-up to the crime in the life of the perpetrator. It is of course a notably short play (only about 700 lines), perhaps never intended to be self-standing, but its handling of the Husband’s actions deliberately makes for a rapid escalation into his crimes by eschewing the idea of the chain of sins that informs A Warning for Fair Women, an idea which figures in the summary of Calverley’s career of wild prodigality in the pamphlet: ‘For mischiefe is of that nature, that it cannot

32 A version of these circumstances, with many changes, was dramatised by George Wilkins in The Miseries of Enforced Marriage (1607), but with the characters given new names, and the story a happy outcome. The relative dating of the two plays is uncertain. Though Wilkins’s play was the first to be printed, Martin Wiggins, British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012- ), vol. 3, considers that A Yorkshire Tragedy may have been written in 1605, and thus the earlier. It may well predate the publication of a pamphlet, now lost, entitled The Araignement Condempnacon and Execucon of Master Caverly at York entered in the Stationers’ Register on 24 August 1605.
stand, but by strengthening of one evill with an other, and so multiply in it selfe until it come to the highest, and then falles with his owne weight.’

The Husband in the play is not the man who turns from a sinner into a criminal by inexorable progression, but the criminal as monster. When the Wife makes her first appearance to lament his prodigality, she calls him ‘half mad’ because he hasn’t enough money, and wonders at his ‘dreadful’ looks (2.13, 17). A Gentleman, overhearing the Husband abuse the Wife, whom he calls ‘my harlot wife’ and threatens to leave unless she sells her dowry to sustain his lifestyle, comments:

Those whom men call mad
Endanger others; but he’s more than mad
That wounds himself. (2.107-9)

The Wife’s entire role is as innocent suffering victim; she is never allowed any subjectivity or speculation on her husband’s condition, and the marriage itself is only a situation, not a subject. When the Husband is informed by the Master of the college where his brother has been a brilliant student that the brother is imprisoned in bond for the Husband’s debt, he has a moment of insight: ‘O, thou confused man, thy pleasant sins have undone thee, thy damnation has beggared thee!’ (4.55-6). His mental torment is conveyed as a state of spiritual contradiction: ‘That heaven should say we must not sin and yet made women; gives us our senses way to find pleasure which being found confounds us. Why should we know those things so much misuse us?’ (4.56-60) What he struggles to understand is the paradoxical condition of fallen humanity and the role of sin, but he can find no enlightenment; his inability to redeem his brother from penury only increases his desperation to get money, and he is prepared to ‘pawn [my] salvation, live at interest’ for it. His next act is to kill his young son, whom he tears from the Wife’s arms. A Servant attempts to restrain him: ‘Were you the devil, I would hold you, sir’. The Husband is provoked by this act on the part of a vassal: ‘Tug at thy master?’ he cries. ‘Tug at a monster’, the Servant responds (5.35, 38).

The Husband’s behaviour appears literally inhuman; the Servant refers to his ‘devilish weight’ (7.2), and believes him to be assisted by ‘hell’s power’. ‘A fouler strength than his’ enables him to overcome all his adversaries. On the way to kill his other infant son, he is thrown by his horse and thus arrested. The pamphlet account identifies this as the work of divine providence, but the play omits to make this point. Once in prison, however,

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33 The play is cited in the Revels edition, ed. by A.C. Cawley and Barry Gaines (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986). This quotation is in Appendix A, p. 101.
the Husband’s sins have reached their apogee. The Knight who is ‘in the place of justice’
pronounces that ‘That man is nearest shame that is past shame’, and it is in the play’s
final scene that, faced with his Wife’s boundless love and ability to forgive, the
unshameable Husband comes at last to himself. This moment is defined as a revelation:

Thou hast given mine eyes
Seven wounds apiece; now glides the devil from me,
Departs at every joint, heaves up my nails.
O, catch him new torments that were ne’er invented;
Bind him one thousand more, you blessed angels,
In that pit bottomless; let him not rise
To make men act unnatural tragedies. (10.17-23)

The ending of a state of diabolic possession is physically evoked as the devil loosens his
hold on the body and slips away; thus the Husband appears absolved of his responsibility
for his crimes, having been taken over by an irresistible dehumanising force. The seven
wounds refer to the seven sacraments, implying a Catholic style absolution, the only detail
to recall that Calverley was in fact a Catholic. The play does not conclude in the usual
way with the Husband making his peace with God and going readily to execution, perhaps
because it was written before Calverley’s fate was known (in fact he opted for death by
pressing, the peine forte et dure, so that his possessions could pass to his surviving
family). But since the Husband is not conceived of as a criminal to whom the judgment
of the law has any relevance this is hardly the point. Neither is the Yorkshire Tragedy
concerned to warn its audience against falling into sin, the Husband’s spiritual state (‘pure
evil’) being so exceptional, or to trace the providential discovery of malefactions. This
bleak and truncated depiction of a crime of violence that destroys a family, without natural
explanation, shows by contrast how the representation of the social and material world in
the other plays unfolds meanings in the crimes they explore.

In one way, it can be said that in these plays sin trumps crime; crime is an act within life
and fully punishable by society, but sin transgresses God’s law, and will redound in the
sinner’s afterlife of damnation unless he or she dies reconciled to God in a state of grace.
This can only be achieved through full confession and penitence. The sacrament of
penance, reconciliation and confession had been one of the seven in the Roman Catholic
Church, but no longer had this status in Protestantism. The formal processes of penance
are replaced in these plays by scaffold confessions (A Warning to fair Women, Two
Lamentable Tragedies) or extreme regimes of spiritual and physical chastisement (A
Woman Killed); even in Arden remorse and regret make late and vestigial appearances.
But crime is more interesting and more complicated; God’s providence is to different
degrees critical in bringing it to light, but must be supported by the agency of the law, which is a social construct and not infallible. Justice is sometimes contingent: Black Will and Shakebag escape punishment for the crime they are hired to commit while Bradshaw is executed for one he doesn’t, Rachel Merry is treated less mercifully than Harry Williams because she is a woman. Sin may be a matter of choice: George Browne prefers to remain loyal to his lover rather than be fully honest with his God; or it may not – Anne Frankford sins because she is a weak woman in a fallen world and sinning is inevitable. In the most pessimistic scenario, it is the devil who has made what appear to be the Husband’s disastrous choices.