

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘Lamentable and True’: Remediations of True Crime in Domestic Tragedies

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The anonymous play *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599) opens with personifications of Tragedy, History, and Comedy each vying to claim the play for their own. Though Tragedy triumphs, she expresses anxiety about her own tragic status when she admits to the audience, ‘My Sceane is London, native and your owne, / I sigh to thinke, my subject too well knowne’ (Induction. 95-6).¹ This anxiety is understandable, considering that *A Warning for Fair Women* does not resemble a stereotypical tragedy of the period, with royal tyrants and vengeful ghosts as its primary concern. The play was instead adapted from a well-known domestic crime: the 1573 murder of London merchant George Sanders by his wife’s lover, and represents a significant trend in the theater of the 1590s of playwrights adapting true murder narratives from all manner of print genres: history chronicles, pamphlets, and broadside ballads. Domestic tragedies such as *Arden of Faversham* (c. 1592), *Page of Plymouth* (1599), *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601), *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (c. 1605), and *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1607) all capitalized on the popularity of these narratives – which guaranteed audiences sensational, formulaic narratives full of titillating violence and moralistic platitudes. Unlike the events dramatized in history plays, those depicted in true crime domestic tragedies existed largely within living memory, took place in the recognizable, domestic settings of the home and neighborhood, and featured characters that – like audience members – were largely of the middling or citizen classes. They were thus more accessibly ‘real’ in a way that plays adapted from ancient and medieval history were not, drawing on the proximity between the audience and the domestic crime for dramatic impact. Indeed, though Tragedy in *A Warning for Fair Women* fears that her

¹ *A Warning for Fair Women*, ed. by Charles Dale Cannon (The Hague: Mouton, 1975). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

subject is ‘too well knowne’, that very familiarity was likely what attracted audiences to the play in the first place.

However, the dramatic medium existed in tension with the stated purpose of true crime narratives: to satisfy readers’ desire for authenticity. Domestic crime tragedies, while trading on the appeal of these true narratives, could not be separated from the generic forms of drama and poetry, which operate outside any discourse of fact or truth-telling. The theatrical medium encouraged playwrights to invent, elide, and present alternative viewpoints to a ‘known true story’, as one such play describes them.² As a result, I argue, the act of transferring well-known, fact-based crime narratives to the stage gave rise to a new kind of dramatic storytelling, premised on accepting the simultaneity of fact and fiction in a narrative which claims truthful origins. Early domestic crime tragedies such as *Arden of Feversham* and *A Warning for Fair Women* recreated the accepted facts of their respective narratives with great fidelity, but relied on speculation and invention to adequately dramatize the characters involved in these murders. I contend that the very act of adding fabricated elements to truth-based stories changed how these stories came to be ‘known’.

To explain the transformative nature of this tension between fidelity and fiction, I draw attention to the adaptation process, which involves a degree of *infidelity* to a source text in order to achieve differentiation between the original source and its adaptation. This contradiction is explained by Gary Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon, who posit that cultural adaptation processes are similar to biological ones. Their claim that ‘as in biological evolution, descent with modification is essential’ suggests that narratives are most successful in cultural transmission when they adapt to new circumstances – such as new genres and new discursive situations.³ Bortolotti’s and Hutcheon’s homology between biological and cultural adaptation thus foregrounds the necessity and inevitability of transformation when narratives such as those of true crime are adapted for the stage from fact-based genres. But this theory also invites questions, especially as it pertains to the circumstances of adaptations featuring narratives whose value *as* narratives was centered in claims of authenticity. How can these stories be modified through adaptation if they have served for so long as sites of truth formation?

² This phrase appears on the title page of the 1656 quarto of *The Witch of Edmonton*, and represents the paradoxical nature of plays based on reported crimes; despite advertising the reality of the story it presents, the play takes liberties with the ‘known true story’ of the titular witch, Elizabeth Sawyer.

³ Gary R. Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon, ‘On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and “Success” – Biologically’, *New Literary History* 38.3 (2007), 443-58 (p. 446).

In this paper, I examine two such adaptations, *Arden of Faversham* and *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*; in doing so, I argue that dramatic adaptations such as these served unique truth-telling functions by embracing speculative elements, and that their inventions allowed dramatists to supplement these narratives with new insights and perspectives. Making murderous figures into embodied characters with passionate voices and motives provided alternate perspectives on the ‘true understanding’ of their crimes, allowing for a degree of audience sympathy and understanding of motive that pamphlets and chronicles actively rejected.⁴ Interactions between characters also clarified the impact of social forces that lay behind these murders – an aspect of criminality often ignored in the original sources. This interplay of differing perspectives and sympathetic connections, only available through speculative recreation, allowed these narratives to act as alternative truths: truths not based on the concept of fidelity to ‘reality’. Although few plays from this genre survive, the later plays that remain extant suggest that, over time, emphasis on accurate re-enactment diminished – particularly when dramatizing crimes that were less well known. With less pressure for fidelity, playwrights not only modified and transformed domestic crime narratives more freely, but modified the nature of what true drama is.

Murder and Truth in Print and Onstage

Domestic crimes were generally mediated for a popular audience first in ballads and pamphlets, and Tessa Watt argues that there was increasing demand from consumers of these popular literary genres ‘for news and information, for veracity and detail’.⁵ Accounts of notorious murders were also included in chronicle histories such as *A Breviat Chronicle* (1551, 1554), Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577, 1587), and John Stow’s *Annales of England* (1580, 1592, 1601, 1605). Chroniclers may also have been responding to balladeers and pamphleteers, whose work elevated the notoriety of these events and made them worthy of inclusion in the chronicle of a given year. For example, Holinshed justifies his inclusion of Thomas Arden’s 1551 murder by claiming the ‘horribleness’ of the murder makes it worthy, despite the fact that it is ‘but a private matter [...] impertinent to this history’.⁶

⁴ Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (London: Henry Denham, 1587), p. 1062.

⁵ Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 37.

⁶ Holinshed, p. 1062.

Holinshed's comment about the 'horribleness' of domestic murder narratives highlights their dual nature as both sensational and moralistic literature; narratives of violent crime were appealing not only for the shock and titillation they provided readers, but also because these narratives served as homiletic examples of Providence, punishment, and repentance. The impact of such sensationalism and moralism was centered in the truth claims of the authors, which were supported and cultivated by inclusion of names, references to place, and details of the crime.⁷ An accurate accounting was necessary to truly convey the 'horribleness' of a murder, or to suggest it as, in Arthur Golding's words, 'an example to the amendment of thy life'.⁸ For this reason, pamphlets and chronicles such as Golding's and Holinshed's were careful to include as many specific details as possible regarding the criminal and crime. These details eventually became an essential part of how these domestic crimes were narrativized and retold in new contexts and adapted into new generic forms; the known or accepted facts of the most famous cases (once established for an audience) remained relatively constant over decades of retelling.

By emphasizing specific details such as dates, names, and places within their narratives – and by preferencing them in adaptation – ballads, pamphlets, and chronicles also participated in a shifting prioritization of fact in early modern culture and thought. Scholars such as Mary Poovey and Barbara Shapiro have noted that the early modern period ushered in what Shapiro specifically calls 'a culture of fact', where knowledge production and social authority increasingly relied on verifiable units of belief – often consisting of numbers or confirmed observations.⁹ Shapiro attributes the broad cultural diffusion of the concept of fact to laypeople's increasing familiarity with the legal language regarding facts and the process of 'fact determination'.¹⁰ As the cultural importance of facts became increasingly significant, a variety of discursive communities

⁷ For more on exemplarity in ballads and pamphlets, see Stuart Kane, 'Wives with Knives: Early Modern Murder Ballads and the Transgressive Commodity', *Criticism* 38.2 (1996), 219-37 (p. 221); Joy Wiltenburg, 'Ballads and the Emotional Life of Crime' in *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500-1800*, ed. by Patricia Fumerton, Anita Guerrini, and Kris McAbee (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 173-86 (p. 177); Natascha Würzbach, *The Rise of the English Street Ballad, 1550-1650*, trans. by Gayna Walls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 150; Watt, p. 41.

⁸ Holinshed, p. 1062; Arthur Golding, *A briefe discourse of the later murther of master George Sanders, a worshipful Citizen of London: and of the apprehension, arreignement, and execution of the principall and accessaries of the same*, 1573. In *A Warning for Fair Women*, ed. by Charles Dale Cannon (The Hague: mouton, 1975). p. 216.

⁹ See Barbara Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England 1550-1720*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

¹⁰ Poovey, p. xiii; Shapiro, p. 10.

incorporated some of the ‘truth-establishing’ practices of the law courts (credible sources, first-hand witness, impartial reporting) into their own rhetorical style.¹¹ Two of these ‘discourses of fact’, as Shapiro terms them, were history and pamphlet news, and both genres often justified their own value through claims of believable reporting.¹² Such claims are exemplified in the title page of *A World of Wonders, a Masse of Murthers, a Covie of Cosenages*, which proclaims that its contents are

not imagined *falso* to delight vaine heads *ociose* nor practiced *trans mare* to breed trueth cum *ambiguitate*, but committed even at home *re vera* and may be prooved *cum honestate*.¹³

This pamphlet makes the language of fact a significant part of its appeal and authority, particularly in the ways in which it emphasizes ‘honestate’ as the means to establish verity. The need to prove the reality (‘*re vera*’) of the ‘execrable factes’ it will report requires detail to create that reality, to banish the ambiguity created by distance, and to confirm the true proximity of these crimes ‘committed even at home’.¹⁴

The appeal of domestic crime narratives as a subject for drama must have been fairly obvious to playwrights who observed their ubiquity and popularity in ballads and pamphlets. In 1598-9 alone, *A Warning for Fair Women* and a second quarto of *Arden of Faversham* were published, and the lost murder plays *Page of Plymouth*, *Cox of Collumpton*, and *The Tragedy of Thomas Merry* were being performed by the Admiral’s Men.¹⁵ But in order to capitalize on the popularity of murder literature for the stage, a major aspect of that popularity would have to be retained: perceived authenticity. Playwrights likely recognized that the appeal of these narratives was in, as Peter Lake claims, the ‘sense of immediacy and actuality of the events they described’.¹⁶ Though poets were expected to transform the sources that they borrowed, these plays would be

¹¹ Shapiro, pp. 4, 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹³ *A World of Wonders, a Masse of Murthers, a Covie of Cosenages* (London, 1595), A1r.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, A1r, C2v.

¹⁵ As many as twenty plays have been proposed as adaptations of contemporary crimes, though about half that number can be confirmed as such and only six are extant. Roslyn L. Knutson, ‘Toe to Toe Across Maid Lane: Repertorial Competition at the Rose and Globe, 1599-1600’, *Acts of Criticism: Performance Matters in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, ed. by Paul Nelson and June Schlueter (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), pp. 21-37 (p. 26); John Addington Symonds, *Shakespeare’s Predecessors* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1908), pp. 329-30; *The Lost Plays Database*, ed. by Roslyn L. Knutson, David McInnis, and Matthew Steggle, <<https://www.lostplays.org>>.

¹⁶ Peter Lake with Michael Questier, *The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 6.

stripped of their *raison d'être* if they likewise stripped the markers of truth out of a 'true story'. Indeed, murder literature in and of itself did not encourage extensive invention on the part of the writer, and therefore stage adaptations – particularly adaptations from the 1590s – hew closely to both the genre's familiar tropes and the particulars of each individual case being adapted.

Such fidelity to plot particulars also served as evidence for the 'truth' of the dramatic adaptation – standing in opposition to the highly stylized fictions normally performed on the stage. Recreating details well-known from print sources grounded plays like *Arden of Faversham* and *A Warning for Fair Women* in the material, observable world of early modern England. Close imitation of the source material also allowed these stories to retain their affective power, especially the ability to shock. For instance, although the broadsides are lost which originally related the murder of Robert Beech by Thomas Merry, the stage directions of *Two Lamentable Tragedies* are careful to explicitly state that Merry 'strickes [Beech] in the head fiteene times'.¹⁷ Such precise stage directions suggest that the details of Beech's murder were well known to the audience, and needed to be specifically reproduced to effectively reenact the murder.

But despite attempts to faithfully recreate the authentic details of murder narratives onstage, certain changes *were* necessary when adapting non-dramatic literature to the stage, and these changes had the potential to defamiliarize a well-known crime. Bortolotti and Hutcheon emphasize the important role genre crossing plays in altering narratives through the adaptation process; they argue that a narrative can find 'novel opportunities in new media', which can often result in 'a diversifying of the narrative unit into different narratives'.¹⁸ There was high potential for such narrative diversifying in the relatively new media venue of blank-verse drama – which provided an excellent vehicle for the murder narrative. Live performance could visually and emotionally amplify the horrific elements of the dramatized deaths, building on the affective power of bearing witness to true events. But dramatization also changed how crimes were mediated for an audience; drama necessitated the creation of compelling characters out of the barest sketches, and required that plot details be stretched into two-hours traffic of the stage. In addition, the censorious moralizing that previously defined and delimited a criminal is put under pressure when such criminals are turned into embodied characters with believable interiority. In the act of performance, these criminals –

¹⁷ *Two Lamentable Tragedies*, (Manchester: Malone Society Reprints, 2013), ll. 463-4.

¹⁸ Bortolotti and Hutcheon, 451-2.

previously framed by pamphleteers like Golding as stock exemplars of ‘miscredite’ – turn back into human beings with their own truths to tell.¹⁹

‘This Naked Tragedy’: *Arden of Faversham*

The 1551 murder of Thomas Arden was perhaps the most famous in early modern England. Arden was stabbed in his own home as part of a conspiracy spearheaded by his wife and her lover. The play, *Arden of Faversham*, is very likely the first tragedy adapted from popular domestic murder literature of the period. Though no pamphlets or ballads survive from the 1550s, in M.L. Wine’s estimation, multiple references to the murder in subsequent literature of the period suggests that the crime ‘must have inspired numerous pamphlets, broadsides, and sermons now completely lost to us’.²⁰ From these early sources, the story of Arden’s murder was repeated and referenced in various chronicles and pamphlets; it survives in its longest and most detailed form in the 1577 and 1587 editions of Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, and this text is likely the source for the play, possibly written as early as 1588 and first published in 1592. The story of Arden’s murder was told and retold, recycled by pamphleteers, revived on the stage, reprinted in playtext form by publishers, and sung by balladeers for over eighty years. In 1621, John Taylor the Water Poet noted that Arden’s murder would remain ‘fresh in memory’, but that memory had never truly dwindled in the decades since the murder took place.²¹ As long as readers and audiences had a taste for domestic crime narratives, authors returned again and again to a story that continued to thrill readers and audiences. It is, in essence, the perfect example of the ‘viral’ potential of early modern murder narratives, and may have, according to Richard Helgerson, inspired the genre of the crime pamphlet itself.²²

The fame of the story was likely what drew the anonymous dramatist (or dramatists) to the story itself, and an accurate retelling of the Arden murder would have been a large part of the play’s appeal to a contemporary audience, and changing the circumstances of the murder in any significant way was probably a non-starter. However, despite the

¹⁹ Golding, p. 216.

²⁰ M.L. Wine, ‘Introduction’ in *Arden of Faversham*, ed. by M.L. Wine (London: Methuen and Co., 1973), p. xxxviii.

²¹ John Taylor, *The Unnatural Father: OR, A Cruell Murther committed by one John Rowse, of the Towne of Ewell, Ten Miles from London, in the County of Surry, Upon Two of his Owne Children* (London, 1621), p. 17.

²² Richard Helgerson, ‘Murder in Faversham: Holinshed’s Impertinent History’, in *The Historical Imagination in Early Modern Britain: History, Rhetoric, and Fiction, 1500-1800*, ed. by Donald R. Kelley and David Harris Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 133-58 (p. 137).

cultural and commercial pressures favored strict fidelity in adaptation, the dramatic adaptation of the Arden narrative did necessitate inevitable alterations to the story. Events needed to be streamlined and connected into a coherent plot that fit the format of dramatic tragedy, and certain extraneous characters were cut or conflated – both for plot clarity and to better fit the size of a typical acting company.²³ More than anything, stage adaptation required that the conspirators mentioned in Holinshed's account be turned into dramatic characters. Holinshed's account already included motivations and invented dialogue not included in other chronicle accounts, but these additions were not sufficient to sustain dramatic interaction for these characters in the play. Holinshed includes basic sketches of these figures, their motives, and their relationships to one another, but his account largely remains a series of events that (while dramatic) are not yet drama.

To complete the transformation from chronicle account to character-driven drama, the anonymous playwright augments the causal events Holinshed describes by emphasizing the human emotions, desires, and competing interests that inspired the murderer of Arden. While the murder plot itself remains compelling, the playwright also utilizes characters to augment and propel the drama forward. The characterization of Arden himself as a sympathetic, tormented victim exemplifies how the original narrative transforms through this adaptive modification – complicating the known facts of the murder. In Holinshed's account, Arden 'winketh at his wife's lewdness' in order to advance his own self-interest, but Arden the character has a much stronger emotional investment in Alice and her infidelity, grieving the loss of her love and seeking to protect her chastity.²⁴ In a later scene, Arden describes a fearful dream of hunters netting him with weapons drawn – a prophetic vision of his own murder that emphasizes his helplessness. Though Arden is still depicted as being 'greedy-gaping still for gain' (1.475), which follows Holinshed's account, he is more fully-realized as a tragic character throughout the play; his life matters more to the drama as a whole, and so his murder is all the more emotionally impactful.²⁵

Contrasted with Arden's character are the various motives of the conspirators, most of whom are presented with some degree of sympathy – as well as understandable motives and real subjectivity. For example, the conspirator Greene is introduced with justified desire for revenge, and his economic desperation after Arden takes his land is given

²³ Alice Arden's daughter is completely cut, and the dramatist conflates her maid and Mosby's sister into one character. For more, see M.L. Wine, p. xxxix.

²⁴ Holinshed, p. 1062.

²⁵ *Arden of Faversham*, ed. by Martin White (London: A & C Black Publishers, 2007). All line references are to this edition.

greater priority in the play than in the source narrative. The motives of minor characters are also deepened and given greater importance in the larger plot. The manservant Michael's desire to marry Susan Mosby becomes a minor plot point, and the threat of a love rival puts increased pressure on Michael to fully commit to the conspiracy. The play thus leaves the essential events unchanged, but every character's commitment to the murder is increased. The wrongness of the murder is not diminished, but the people who initiated it become more 'real' by being given strong emotional investments in the crime. While the play does not shy away from depicting these characters as misguided and violent, it also complicates this interpretation by making Arden's death *matter* to each of the conspirators – and to the audience.

Interpretive characterization of real murderers, while not based entirely in known truths, could nevertheless provide audiences with an understanding of the crime and its perpetrators that *felt* true. In this, the play exceeds Holinshed in its attempt to 'set forth [...] true understanding of the circumstances', as his account prioritizes factual reporting and moralistic condemnation over speculation of motives.²⁶ But such imaginative speculation is almost essential when depicting the inner world of reality-based characters in the dramatic medium. As a supplement to the faithful adaptation of the facts of Arden's murder, such speculative interpretations of criminal interiority approximate a kind of emotional reality, something histories and other fact-based discourses could only provide in a limited capacity.

In providing an emotional supplement to the Arden narrative, the play also destabilizes the very nature of the truth it purports to present. When characters are allowed to present their own perspectives on a crime and voice their personal truths, maintaining a singular, moralistic belief about 'the truth of Arden's death' is no longer possible (Epilogue 1). There is no better example of this than that of Alice Arden herself, who is given little description in Holinshed's account beyond the description, 'Inflamed in love [...] and loathing her husband'.²⁷ When Alice is adapted as a dramatic character, particularly when defending the validity of her extramarital love, she is transformed from a stock husband murderer into a tragic subject who demands agency for herself and understanding from her audience. Her characterization remains transgressive, such as when she claims that Arden has no right to 'govern me that am to rule myself', but as Catherine Belsey argues, her determination is figured as almost heroic in its defiance

²⁶ Holinshed, p. 1062.

²⁷ Ibid.

(10.84, 89).²⁸ In Alice's own words, the intensity of her desire is a legitimating force, rather than a sign of degeneracy, and it serves as a valid justification of her crime, for '[Arden] must leave to live that [she] may love' (10.86).

This transformation of a real murderess into a sympathetic character may perhaps be best explained by applying Mario DiGangi's argument regarding 'dramatic embodiment', particularly of characters based on transgressive sexual stereotypes – what he calls 'sexual types'. DiGangi argues that the embodiment of characters, namely the 'the social, verbal, and corporeal interactions that constitute drama', allows characters a degree of agency to resist 'the constraints of dominant social and sexual ideologies' and to push back against the reductive stereotypes created to reinforce these ideologies.²⁹ These 'dissident' characters can thus expose the limitations of reductive stereotypes to explain individual behavior.³⁰ A similar resistant agency may be at play when *criminal* types are adapted into embodied characters on the stage; instead of exceeding the parameters of a sexual stereotype, characters like Alice Arden are able to exceed the parameters of the known 'truth' or 'facts' of their stories as established in previous retellings. The characterization of Alice Arden does not necessarily disprove those facts, but instead provides audiences access to a 'dissident' perspective on those events, revealing the 'partiality and inadequacy' of dismissing her as an 'importunate and bloody minded strumpet'.³¹ After all, a murder narrative cannot help but be inadequate and partial if it ignores the voice of the criminal. As an embodied character, Alice provides audiences an alternative understanding of her circumstances; she may be bloody-minded, but also comes across as unhappy, desperate, even self-destructive in her passion. This more complex, resistant characterization of a husband-murderer exposes the limits of moralistic interpretations of true crimes, and hints at the possibility of alternate realities that are foreclosed when crimes are reduced to a sermonizing narrative advocating social and religious obedience.

The dramatic device of the soliloquy becomes an important site for a character to voice dissident interpretations of a true event, allowing the famous figure of Alice Arden to voice her own perspective. In her first soliloquy, Alice demonstrates both her desire for

²⁸ Catherine Belsey, 'Alice Arden's Crime: *Arden of Faversham* (c. 1590)' in *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. by David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (Routledge: New York, 1991), pp. 133-50 (p. 137).

²⁹ Mario DiGangi, *Sexual Types: Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare to Shirley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 7, 6.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 7.

³¹ DiGangi, p. 7; John Ponet, *A Shorte Treatise of Politike Power* (Strasbourg, 1556), I2v; Holinshed, p. 1064.

Mosby and her contempt for marriage, swearing that 'Whether it be or no, he shall be mine / In spite of him, of Hymen, and of rites' (1.103-4). Her determination is similar to powerful dramatic subjects such as Tamburlaine and Faustus, and the emotional force with which she speaks that determination strongly impacts a viewing audience. Speaking later of Mosby, she laments the forces keeping them apart, and swears to do all in her power to remove them:

But, if I live, that block shall be removed,
And Mosby, thou that comes to me by stealth,
Shalt neither fear the biting speech of men
Nor Arden's looks. As surely shall he die
As I abhor him and love only thee. (1.137-41).

This speech pits Alice's and Mosby's love against the entire community, and the intensity with which she swears on her own life to defy them and murder her husband creates a vivid picture of overwhelming passion for the viewing audience. This speech conveys the intensity of her desires and the force of her personality far more viscerally than the *Chronicles*, and brings the audience closer to accessing a different kind of realism that Holinshed could provide: and a deeper exploration of the mental world of a murderer on the brink of murder. This focus on emotion and interiority could serve as a supplement to older, more accepted versions of the Arden murder, but the very act of humanizing Alice Arden could also contest moralistic versions of the crime. Introducing an alternative point of view regarding 'the truth of Arden's death' creates a complicated interpretation of 'truth' and the 'real' that is multivocal in nature, and which subverts the project of pamphlets and chronicles that purport to give audiences truth without ambiguity, to provide 'understanding of the circumstances', and a satisfactory example of wickedness punished.

Arden of Faversham remains faithful to the general arc of the narrative, to well-known details such as gifts exchanged by the lovers, places where the murder was attempted, and the manner in which it was committed. But the play also blurs the stark moralism that usually framed the narrative through the act of creating dramatic characters with believably complicated interiority. *Arden* does not move to endorse the bloody actions of these characters, but in being given a chance to voice their motives and the pressures under which they operate, these characters subvert the simple homiletic interpretation that characterized previous accounts of the murder. This greater emphasis on the emotional stakes of the crime for all the characters involved suggests the possibility that 'true understanding of the circumstances' is conditional and limited, and likewise hints at the limits of factual details to provide a satisfactory account of true crime details.

‘When Sin Makes Sinners Fall’: *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* and Appropriations of Domestic Crime

Arden of Faversham began a trend of adapting domestic murder literature for the stage that reached its greatest popularity during the 1590s, though playwrights would continue to experiment with true crime adaptations throughout the Jacobean era. While the popularity of murder plays waned from its peak in 1598-9, with fewer new plays being performed and published, plays published after the turn of the seventeenth century demonstrate an enduring interest in the subject of domestic crime, as well as the continuing influence of speculative elements in the adaptation process. Plays such as *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1607) and *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) are less concerned with authentic and fact-based adaptations of source murder narratives than were plays such as *Arden* and *A Warning for Fair Women* – and were often perfunctory in valuing the ‘lamentable and true’ nature of their stories.³² And, though *A Yorkshire Tragedy* stands as the exception, these plays are also far more likely to experiment with the source narrative, discarding key details reported in source pamphlets and providing far more fictional interventions. Through speculative characterization, alternative endings, and overt blending of fiction and fact, these plays suggest the limits of mere fact when recreating reality.

To demonstrate this shift in adaptive practice, I turn my attention to George Wilkins’s tragicomedy, *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1607), which – while the most critically obscure of surviving seventeenth-century domestic crime dramas – is also the most overtly faithless to its source narrative. That source is the 1605 pamphlet, *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers*, which is unique in having inspired both Wilkins’s *Miseries* and Thomas Middleton’s *A Yorkshire Tragedy*. Unlike Middleton’s earlier and more-faithfully adapted play, *Miseries* is only loosely based on the crimes of Walter Calverley, who murdered two of his sons and attempted the murder of his wife and youngest child.³³ Indeed, the imaginative liberties taken by Wilkin’s play are what distinguish *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* from other true crime plays of the period. *Miseries* is perhaps the first true crime play to *appropriate* a murder pamphlet

³² This phrase appears on the title page of the 1619 quarto of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, and is the only sign that the play is based on a true story.

³³ For more on the dating of these two plays, both of which were performed by the King’s Men, see Baldwin Maxwell, *Studies in the Shakespeare Apocrypha* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1956), p. 176; Stanley Wells, ‘Introduction to *A Yorkshire Tragedy*’ in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 452-5 (p. 452).

for the stage, drawing on plot elements based a familiar story rather than attempting to faithfully adapt it into dramatic form.

The distinction between adaptation and appropriation is important to note; adaptation theorist and early modernist Julie Sanders suggests that appropriation differs from adaptation in that it lacks a clear relationship to an original source, and ‘frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain’.³⁴ *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* takes just such a decisive journey away from its source; while Wilkins is certainly informed by the Calverley murders, as his play features the attempted murder of a wife and children, his play does not endeavor to authentically recreate the reported ‘facts’ of these murders on the stage. The broad strokes of the Calverley murder narrative are maintained, but – unlike earlier true crime plays – there is no attempt to recreate specific details or establish artistic value through accurate recreation of events. The play instead finds value in its *proximity* to a perceived reality, rather than in close imitation of that perceived reality.

To create such proximity, Wilkins draws heavily on one detail from the pamphlet source as the speculative basis for the play’s major plot: Calverley’s previous, broken engagement. His past serves as inspiration for the character of William Scarborough, a young man determined to ruin himself and his family after his first betrothal is forcibly overthrown by a guardian. Informed by Calverley’s story, Wilkins uses his play to critique the potential social dangers that inspired those events, which seem all the more pressing through their basis in a real crime. This connection to a perceived reality, therefore, legitimates claims made in the fictionalized aspects of the narrative.³⁵ At the same time, Wilkins’s imaginative deviations from the known facts of the Calverley murders allows him to construct an alternative history of the crime that – unbound by facts – best fits his thematic message. Even the simple act of changing the main character’s name to Scarborough licenses subsequent alterations in the narrative; such a change signals that this is not *really* the truth-based story of Walter Calverley anymore, though Scarborough’s character arc largely follows that of Calverley as laid out in *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers*. This one change allows Wilkins to radically reimagine the domestic crime drama as free to depict a true event not the way it was, but how it could have been.

³⁴ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 26.

³⁵ I am beholden to Steven N. Lipkin’s formative work on modern docudrama for this observation. For more, see *Real Emotional Logic: Film and Television Docudrama as Persuasive Practice* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), p. xi.

Despite Wilkins's creative departures from the original crime narrative, it was important to retain a connection between the play and perceived reality, as the framework of the Calverley murder narrative authorized the play's social commentary. Therefore, as in the source pamphlet, the root of all of Scarborough's shameful behaviors in the play finds its origin in the 'enforced marriage' imposed on the young ward by his greedy elder: Lord Falconbridge. Scarborough laments his position, crying, 'Fate pitty me, because I am inforst, / For I have heard those matches have cost blood, / Where love is once begun and then withstood' (2.493-5).³⁶ His claim will prove prescient; Scarborough's former fiancé kills herself, he leaves his family for a life of debauchery, and his eventual shame leads him to threaten murder against his children. Even in the moment of murderous passion, he finds the origin of all this woe in enforced marriage, and takes comfort that he may 'say all was done by inforst marriage' (10.2427). This oft-repeated phrase is indicative of how Wilkins appropriates this true narrative to fit his own ends. Without the need to concern himself with accuracy, Wilkins is free to shape his drama more explicitly around the unifying themes of poor guardianship, forced marriage, and youthful degeneracy. By depicting both Scarborough and his guardian as equally responsible for the harmful events that follow Scarborough's enforced marriage, the play is able to approach these themes from different angles and present them with both sympathy and critique.

These themes from the source narrative are deepened through further imaginative alteration of the source narrative, particularly Wilkins's inclusion of additional characters and subplots that all connect to and thematically deepen the plot of Scarborough's downward spiral into riot and excess. These additions transform the domestic crime first presented in *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* into a larger interrogation of the forces that corrupt young men away from responsibility. For example, Scarborough's miseries are preyed upon by a set of London gallants, who 'live by the fall of yong heirs / as swine by the dropping of Acorns' (5.1044-45). Wilkins also creates three siblings for Scarborough, which compounds the young man's subsequent failure to provide for his family when they are driven to thievery through his profligacy. However, the character of Lord Falconbridge allows Wilkins to allocate blame to elders who subjugate young men to their own desires; they are the ones described as 'greater sinners, / That made this match, and were unhappy men, / For they caus'd all' (10.2596-98). The superimposing of fiction on a factual plot framework also empowers Wilkins to tell the story in a manner that restores the social order without

³⁶ George Wilkins, *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, ed. by Glenn H. Blayney (Oxford: Malone Society, 1963). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically. This edition contains continuous line numbers, though it is broken into scenes.

tragedy. Lord Falconbridge's death restores balance to the play and prevents Scarborough from committing murder; his deathbed bequests restore Scarborough's wealth, providing for his wife and children as well as for his siblings. As Scarborough's faithful servant tells him, the bequest reveals that Falconbridge knew 'Your sinne was his, the punishment his due' (10.2841). The source of true justice in the play is located not in punishing a murderer who was led astray by poor guardianship, but in restoration of a troubled young man to his former virtuous potential. Scarborough's character is not framed as an example of sinfulness to avoid or of penitence to promote, and this story is not, as it is in the original pamphlet, a story of 'murther so detestable, that ... it desires record for example sake'.³⁷ As such, the imaginative license Wilkins takes allows him to rewrite the admonitory judgments applied to a debauched and violent man in the original murder narrative, effectively undercutting the moralistic interpretation of the original crime.

This is the first play adapted from domestic crime narratives to diverge so clearly from its source material, both in details and generic style, and – as *Miseries* went through four editions between 1607 and 1637 – it can be assumed that audiences and readers were not bothered by these divergences.³⁸ In favoring fictionalized appropriation over faithful adaptation, Wilkins de-essentialized the adaptive priorities that previously shaped the dramatization of domestic crime. Edification, entertainment, and the thrill of true crime were still present in the drama, but authentic details of that crime are valuable to Wilkins only as materials he can use to construct his social truth regarding the dangers of poor guardianship to young men. Grounded in actuality, the play forms its own kind of truth through the very process of resisting the 'lamentable and true' nature of the Calverley murders. Because Wilkins builds a meaningful social critique out of this real event – and provides a bloodless-but-just resolution – fiction becomes acceptable as an enhancement and correction of the truth.

Conclusion

It would be thirteen years after *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* before another prominent domestic crime tragedy would be adapted for the stage. Like its predecessor, *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, blended authenticity, speculation, and humorous elements into pointed social critique.

³⁷ *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* (London, 1605), p. 1.

³⁸ The dates of these editions are 1607, 1611, 1629, and 1637. See Glenn H. Hayney's introduction to the Malone Society reprint.

By adding an overtly fictional murder plot to the story of Elizabeth Sawyer – who was convicted and executed for witchcraft in 1621 – the playwrights shunt the majority of customary moral didacticism away from the reality-based Sawyer and onto the fictional murderer, Frank Thorney. Rowley, Dekker, and Ford instead treat Sawyer’s story with a strong degree of sympathy, and condemn the poverty, neglect, and misogynistic scorn that leads her to diabolism.³⁹ This turn from authenticity towards speculation in *The Witch of Edmonton* is all the more unique because the tract upon which the play is based, Henry Goodcole’s 1621 pamphlet *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch*, is so intent on conveying ‘nothing but matter of fact’.⁴⁰ The playwrights, unconcerned with these facts, banish Goodcole’s conventional moralizing replace it with their interpretation of Sawyer’s social truth. Three decades after the first murder play was written, these later playwrights are clearly unconcerned with accurately recreating a recent crime as it was known to the public. Though its title page touts that *The Witch of Edmonton* is based on a ‘known true story’, and it was written only a few months after Sawyer’s execution, the playwrights challenge that known truth by altering the authentic aspects of the story with imaginative elements. Goodcole’s attempt to tell ‘nothing but matter of fact’ regarding Elizabeth Sawyer’s crime did not succeed in preventing fictions written about her life from flourishing – or from providing alternative insights into the ‘truth’ of her situation.⁴¹

Plays like *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Miserie of Enforced Marriage* represent a new kind of drama that embraced elements of fiction as appropriate means to tell a true story. Speculative elaborations had always played a part in how domestic crime narratives were adapted for the stage, as with the characterization in *Arden of Faversham*. However, the example of later murder plays suggests that stage adaptations of domestic crime were fulfilling new truth-telling functions – different in many ways from the function of the fact-based documents that served as source material for the drama. The continued popularity of domestic crime literature in ballad and pamphlet form demonstrates that interest in the details of a crime remained, but as it concerned drama, ‘true understanding’ was not cultivated only through accurate recreation of a reported crime.⁴² Rather, the dramatic form allowed playwrights speculative license to

³⁹ Viviana Comensoli, ‘Witchcraft and Domestic Tragedy in *The Witch of Edmonton*’ in *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Jean R. Brink, Allison P. Coudert and Maryanne C. Horowitz (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 1989), pp. 43-60 (p. 45).

⁴⁰ Henry Goodcole, *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch* in Marion Gibson, *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 299-315 (p. 302).

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 302.

⁴² Holinshed, p. 1062.

explore a murderer's interiority and to interrogate criminalizing motives inflicted by society. Giving voice to a murderer's perspective also gave voice to alternative perspectives of a crime, and when playwrights embraced criminal characters as sympathetic subjects, their stories could become powerful critiques of the social forces that compelled them to crime. Such speculative treatment of crime and criminals infused domestic crime tragedies with insight that had the potential to seem more 'true' than the factual details that originally defined the reality of a known crime. As fiction and fact were increasingly used concurrently in dramatic adaptations of true crime, these dramatic adaptations created new possibilities for fiction-based truth formation within the burgeoning culture of fact taking shape in the early modern period.