

# ‘My Bliss Is Mixed with Bitter Gall’: Gross Confections in Arden of Faverham

Yan Brailowsky

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  -  **Yan Brailowsky** ‘My bliss is mixed with bitter gall’: gross confections in *Arden of Faversham*
  -  **Anny Crunelle Vanrigh** Peripatetic Arden: the Spectral Geographies of *Arden of Faversham*
  -  **Francis Guinle** *Arden muss sterben* : quand l’opéra réinterprète l’Histoire et le théâtre
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Yan Brailowsky

## **‘My bliss is mixed with bitter gall’: gross confections in *Arden of Faversham***

Article

### **Résumé**

*Arden of Faversham* est une pièce souvent considérée comme étant mal ficelée. Les apparentes contradictions sont à l’image du motif du poison qui apparaît par itération dans la première scène de la pièce. Il s’agit de montrer comment les assassins d’Arden, et le public, doivent apprendre à « tempérer le poison », un poison qu’il faut interpréter dans son contexte historique et méta-théâtral. Loin d’être un artifice mortifère, le poison se révèle ici le moteur du comique de répétition caractéristique de cette tragédie « domestique » proche de la farce.

### **Abstract**

What might strike some as *Arden of Faversham*’s faulty construction may perhaps be ascribed to the fact that Arden’s murderers, as well as the play’s audience, had to learn how to “temper poison” (i.229). Poison is not simply a means to commit murder, its use also requires great dexterity, one which must be interpreted within a historical and metatheatrical context. The ineffectual use of poison lays the foundation for what is to come: a play in which murder becomes a laughing matter.

### **Table des matières**

- [1. “When was I so long in killing a man?”](#)
- [2. Of poisoned pictures, powders and crucifixes](#)
- [3. Mithridate and ratsbane “to prevent the worst”](#)

### **Texte intégral**

It famously took several ham-fisted attempts by Thomas Arden’s murderers to finally manage to do away with their victim. The real-life case of this murder in Kent in 1551 came down to us in several forms, in chronicles (John Stow’s *Annales* and Holinshed’s *Chronicles*), in ballad form, and in a play, *Arden of Faversham*, published in 1592 and occasionally attributed to Shakespeare, Marlowe, Kyd and other Elizabethan dramatists. In the theatrical version of Arden’s story, his murderers tried a succession of ploys: giving him a poisoned broth, a poisoned painting or crucifix, mugging him near St Paul’s cathedral, smothering him in his sleep, shooting him near Rainham Down, and again near the Isle of Sheppey, before finally clobbering him with a pressing iron and stabbing him in his own counting-house. All in all, according to one tally, “eight attempts on Arden’s life are made or contemplated”.<sup>1</sup> The number of available versions of this story mirror the almost comically iterative nature of the botched murder attempts, a repetition which has made the “domestic tragedy” genre, which *Arden* purportedly inaugurates, somewhat of a misnomer.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I will attempt to explore the *consistently* contradictory nature of this play in which “bliss is mixed with bitter gall” (viii.163).<sup>3</sup> I

will try to show the manner in which this oxymoron is emblemized by the programmatic poison motif which appears by iteration in the play's opening scene. What might strike some as *Arden of Faversham*'s faulty construction, or "gross confection" (i.425, 423), may perhaps be ascribed to the fact that Arden's murderers, as well as the play's audience, had to learn how to "temper poison" (i.229). I will argue that poison is not simply a means to commit murder, its use also requires great dexterity, one which must be interpreted within a historical and metatheatrical context. In the process, I hope to prove that the ineffectual use of poison lays the foundation for what is to come: a play in which murder becomes a laughing matter—until it no longer is.

### 1. "When was I so long in killing a man?"

3To understand the references to poison in the play, I would first like to briefly analyze the audience's preconceived notions on "what the play is about"—to prophesy after the fact, as it were.<sup>4</sup>

4On the face of it, *Arden of Faversham* was the "true" and "tragic" story of a murder ("The Lamenta / ble and True Tra / gedy of M. Ar / den of Feversham / in Kent. / Who was most wickedly murdered [etc.]"). This becomes obvious early on in the play when several characters call for Arden's death. Arden himself forebodingly cries out to his wife: "this night, sweet Alice, thou hast killed my heart" (i.65), while she makes us privy to her bloodthirsty resentment: "As surely shall he die / As I abhor him" (140-141). Even his servant Michael plots against his master: "I'll see that he shall not live above a week" (146), "Why then, I say that I will kill my master" (162). Later, Alice and her lover, Mosby, discuss the relative merits of poisoned pictures, powders or crucifixes.

5Revealingly, despite numerous references to poison in these early lines, poison was *not* what ultimately killed Arden. In fact, he escapes completely unscathed from poisoning in the play, despite the fact that Holinshed, who mentions one episode with poison in his chronicle, suggests that it was almost successful. According to him, Arden had "received a spoonful or two of the [poisoned] milk [...] Then he took horse and rode to Canterbury, and by the way fell into extreme purging upwards and downwards, and so escaped for that time."<sup>5</sup> Why did the dramatist choose to refer to poison repeatedly while making it totally innocuous?

6*Arden* does not feature a Prologue which might have given us hermeneutic indications or what to expect: we have no guide helping us follow the unravelling of Arden's tragedy.<sup>6</sup> We only have Franklin's Epilogue to cast retrospective light on the case we have just witnessed. The play's multiplicity of form and substance has given rise to a number of innovative readings in the past few decades, but they seldom pay much attention to the poison motif.<sup>7</sup> Those articles which do focus on *Arden*'s use of poison approach the play in a similar, socio-historical vein. Thus, Jean-Claude

Mailhol mainly lists historical and literary parallels of the *topos* of the vengeful, treacherous woman, whose unruly tongue proves venomous, and Margaret Tassi discusses the role of the poisoned picture as proof that “The dramatist tapped into cultural prejudices against painters in a manner that would have been perceived as personally threatening to audience-members.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>When critics discuss poison, it is most often to highlight the corrupt nature of the characters, be it Arden, Alice, Mosby, their servants Michael and Susan, Clarke the painter, and the two ruffians, Black Will and Shakebag. These characters are, to varying degrees, sinners and their souls symbolically “infected”.<sup>9</sup> Nobody is saved from a general purgation.

<sup>8</sup>This seemingly universal condemnation heaped on all of the characters (including innocent victims like Bradshaw) runs the risk of undermining the moral of the tale, invalidating the play’s homiletic *raison d’être* and bringing grist to the mill of those who, like William Rankins and Stephen Gosson, considered theater as a threat of “moral infection”.<sup>10</sup> But *Arden* can actually serve to back both pro- and anti-theatrical agendas. As in *moralia* of old, the play warns us explicitly against sin and calls on sinners to repent, as when Alice interrupts Bradshaw’s appeal in the last scene by exclaiming:

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. (xviii.9-11)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>But the most hardened criminals in the play also elicit bizarre sympathy from the audience. In fact, this may be one of the play’s salient features: audience members take pleasure in deferring Arden’s death—up to a point. Eventually, one actually *wishes* him dead. In the words of Frances Dolan, “It takes so long to kill Arden that one may find oneself rooting for the conspirators—why won’t he die?”<sup>12</sup> If Holinshed’s account of the case sought to emphasize the “horribleness”<sup>13</sup> of the deed, why does the play based on his narrative very quickly prove to be more of a (domestic) tragic *comedy* than a bloody tragedy? This question is self-consciously echoed by Black Will and Shakebag in one of the last scenes, no doubt voicing the audience’s impression that it is not getting its money’s worth in gore, when the characters look back upon the many missed opportunities:

*Black Will*. Sirrah Greene, when was I so long in killing a man?

*Greene*. I think we shall never do it; let us give it over.

*Shakebag*. Nay! Zounds, we’ll kill him though we be hanged at his door for our labour. (xiv.1-4)

<sup>10</sup>Why not concentrate on the last moments of Arden’s life, rather than wade through an almost tedious series of failed attempts? Dramatists, Sidney argued, “must not begin *ab ovo*, but they must come to the principal point of that one action which they will represent”, moulding subsequent events to fit the needs of the stage and audience.<sup>14</sup> I would like to argue

that one of these “principal points” comes paradoxically when the playwright goes through the trouble of adding poisoned paintings and poisoned crucifixes in the lengthy opening scene even if, or precisely because, none are actually used. Although *Arden* can be read as a slice of history, as proclaimed in the title page, it is first and foremost a piece of drama with a carefully selected starting point.<sup>15</sup>

## **2. Of poisoned pictures, powders and crucifixes**

11*Arden* is not only a “domestic” tragedy, and references to poison are not simply one manner of murdering *Arden*: poison is also a symbol of the play’s dramaturgy, one which uses and distorts a religiously troubled “true history”.

12One can interpret references to poison in the light of topical debates, as suggested by Franklin’s remarks in the opening and closing lines of the play. In the first scene, he informs *Arden* that the Lord Protector has granted him “All the lands of the Abbey of Faversham” (i.5) after the Dissolution of the monasteries (in the 1530s); later he tells us that “behind the Abbey / There he [*Arden*] lies murdered” (xiv.377-378), that “*Arden* lay murdered in that plot of ground / Which he by force and violence held from Reede” (Epilogue, 9-10). Such references suggest that the poisoned devices can be analyzed with a specific religious-historical background in mind, which anchors the play in a topical debate about iconoclasm and anti-Catholic sentiment.

13But there are also several ways in which the play departs from its historical sources. Holinshed, for instance, simply speaks of a “painter dwelling in Faversham who had skill of poisons”<sup>16</sup> which prove fairly effective even in small doses, unlike what occurs in the play. There is no talk of poisoned pictures or poisoned crucifixes, and the painter is not mentioned elsewhere in his narrative. Similarly, unlike the source, the play claims it is *Mosby*, rather than *Alice*, who first speaks of poison—a surprise, given that it was *women* who were typically associated with poison. Citing a host of authors such as Pliny, Quintilian, Augustine, Livy and others, Reginald Scot famously claimed women to “have been the first inventers, and the greatest practisers of poisoning, and more naturallie addicted and given thereunto than men”.<sup>17</sup> According to Leggatt, choosing *Mosby* as the first to suggest the use of poison could serve to illustrate the character’s *parvenu* mentality, or his vain wish to mimick more illustrious and “Italianite” villains appearing on the London stage.<sup>18</sup>

14*Mosby* may have been a ‘new man’, but one could suggest that he is equally rooted in the popular past, exploiting medieval superstitions and Popish customs in the service of an evil plot. The manner in which *Mosby* describes his meeting with *Clarke* has all the trappings of a demonic encounter:

I happened on a painter yesternight,  
The only cunning man of Christendom,

For he can temper poison with his oil  
That whoso looks upon the work he draws  
Shall, with the beams that issue from his sight,  
Suck venom to his breast and slay himself.  
Sweet Alice, he shall draw thy counterfeit,  
That Arden may by gazing on it perish. (i.227-234)

15The accumulation of details is telling: the encounter is apparently fortuitous (Mosby “*happened on a painter*”), but it occurs at a time when Satan is most active (“yesternight”, perhaps even *in media nocte*), and the painter’s character is alliteratively defined along confessional, rather than geographical, lines using a connoted term (he is “The only *cunning* man [i.e. a witch?] of *Christendom*”).<sup>19</sup> Lastly, the manner in which the poisoned picture operates—the onlooker “Suck[s] venom to his breast and slay[s] himself”—suggests demonic possession, one of the most common explanations for suicide in the early modern era.<sup>20</sup>

16There may be an additional religious reference in this speech if we consider Mosby’s request that Clarke paint Alice’s “counterfeit”. He could well have drawn Alice in the old style, that is, in the guise of a saint or martyr, as that is how Alice portrays herself before Arden and his neighbours when she exclaims: “Was ever silly woman so tormented?” (i.389), or when she voices similar complaints about her husband’s mistreatment.

17The moment Mosby mentions the poisoned crucifix may be read in a similar fashion, using and subverting popular embodiments of Christian piety:<sup>21</sup>

I do remember once in secret talk  
You told me how you could compound by art  
A crucifix impoisoned,  
That whoso look upon it should wax blind,  
And with the scent be stifled, that ere long  
He should die poisoned that did view it well.  
I would have you make me such a crucifix (i.609-615)

18Here again, it is Mosby who is the first to recall a *secret* conversation with the painter in which poison is suggested. What is telling here is the need for the victim to “view it [the crucifix] well”, suggesting an expression of piety more agreeable with idolatrous Catholicism than with Edward VI’s reformed Church. For people like John Calvin, “wheresoever a Crucifix stands mopping and mowing in the Church, it is all one as if the Divell had defaced the sonne of God.”<sup>22</sup> When Arden was murdered in 1551, England had just experienced bouts of iconoclasm, with whitewashing of churches and defacing of statues. Mentioning a crucifix was thus a dead giveaway, as it were, of anti-Catholic sentiment—a sign that the device was inherently malevolent.

19Elizabethan audiences would have understood the literally poisonous danger of idolatry depicted in *Arden*’s Edwardian England. The play’s



topicality remained virtually unchanged four decades after the events, as the Catholic threat was still a serious concern in the early 1590s. The Armada had been defeated only four years previous to the publication of the play in 1592, and Catholic plots were still very much in people's minds.<sup>23</sup>

20The play's awareness of the symbolic relevance of religious issues provides an explanation for the addition of the unholy trinity of poisoned pictures, powders and crucifixes. But why are we told Alice refuses the poisoned picture? And why is the poisoned crucifix never produced?

### **3. Mithridate and ratsbane "to prevent the worst"**

21In a bizarre claim, Alice says the poisoned picture represents a threat for *her*, as well as for her husband.<sup>24</sup> Arguably, the self-reflective nature of the poisoned picture illustrates what one could call the "suicidal conduct" of Alice and Mosby, as noted by critics who have pointed out the great number of times when they call on Arden to kill *them*. I would like to argue that this self-destructive streak is contained, and perhaps even illustrated, by the repetitive reference to poison in the opening scene.

22Poison, it must be recalled, was a double-edged notion in the early modern era. Centuries before Derrida spoke of Plato's *pharmakos*, both poison and remedy.<sup>25</sup> early-modern audiences already thought potions and poisons were antithetical terms derived from the *same* Latin root, *pōtiō*. The difference between curative potion and deadly poison was understood to be a matter of degree. As famously summed up by Paracelsus: "All is poison, nothing is poison, it is the degree which makes the poison".<sup>26</sup>

23This notion of poisonous degree may explain the otherwise curiously iterative nature of the murder attempts against Arden. Death would ensue only when Arden was administered the *proper dose* of poison (or violence), in this case when nearly all the characters in the plot gathered one evening in a room in Arden's house. Only then was the desired mix of poisonous influences obtained and Arden finally murdered. Before scene xiv, it was either too much or too little, too early or too late.

24This balancing act is suggested by the repeated use of dual figures of speech, such as inversion or antithesis. In one example, Mosby arguably uses a *hysteron proteron* by depicting Arden vomiting *before* eating of the poisoned broth, calling it the effect of his venomous jealousy:

*Mosby.* Arden, now thou hast belched and vomited  
The rancorous venom of thy mis-swoll'n heart (i.324-325)

25In another example appearing *after* the failed episode with the poisoned broth, the problem of degree is discussed in an oxymoronic and contradictory exchange between Alice and Mosby. Alice speaks mockingly of the painter's "goodly poison" but Mosby interprets the concoction's failure differently:

*Alice.* Was it not a goodly poison that he gave!



Why, he's as well now as he was before.  
It should have been some fine confection  
That might have given the broth some dainty taste.  
This powder was too gross and populous.

*Mosby*. But had he eaten but three spoonfuls more,  
Then had he died and our love continued. (i.421-427)

26 While Alice believes the “confection” was “*too* gross and populous”, Mosby seems to argue her husband needed to ingest “three spoonfuls *more*”. Ascertaining the correct degree of poison proves difficult, and one can note that a similar difficulty occurs in the staging of the play, where much depends on the relative credibility of Shakebag and Black Will’s mix of ferocity and stupid candor, and on Alice’s ability to seduce even her most hardened critics.[27](#)

27 The double-edged nature of drugs and poison is made explicit elsewhere, again through antithesis. In the opening scene, after Arden has tasted of the poisoned broth, he and Alice use the same universal remedy, mithridate, seemingly for opposite purposes:

*Arden*. Franklin, thou hast a box of mithridate;  
I'll take a little to prevent the worst. [...]

*Alice*. Give me a spoon; I'll eat of it myself.  
Would it were full of poison to the brim! (i.382-383, 386-387)

28 There is a possibility that Alice is speaking of the broth, only we are told earlier in a stage direction that “she throws down the broth on the ground” (i.367.SD), and it is unlikely that she would have tasted of it, given her prior refusal of the poisoned picture for fear it should harm her. Thus, while her husband takes mithridate “to prevent the worst”, she would have some to *provoke* the worst.

29 Tellingly, Arden’s line: “I’ll take a little [of mithridate] to prevent the worst” (i.383) is echoed in the execution scene, antithetically and with a chiasmus, as Michael does not request a universal remedy but deadly poison to silence Alice: “To prevent the worst I’ll buy some ratsbane” (xiv.294). Michael’s line illustrates the contaminating and self-reflective nature of poisons.

30 There is yet a *third* way to interpret the poison motif in the play which is also based on the notion of degree, only it does not distinguish the medicinal drug from the lethal poison. Rather, it distinguishes the play taken at face value and the play taken *in the second degree*, i.e. humorously. This self-conscious realization of the play’s comic undertones occurs when one decides to view the ineffectual iteration of “exotic” poisoned devices as absurd. This may account for what sounds like an *excursus* in the opening scene, when Alice and Mosby ask Clarke how he manages to paint poisoned pictures without injury:

*Alice* [...] Why, Clarke, is it possible  
That you should paint and draw it out yourself,

The colours being baleful and impoisoned,  
And no ways prejudice yourself withal?

*Mosby*. Well questioned, Alice. Clarke, how answer you that?

*Clarke*. Very easily. I'll tell you straight  
How I do work of these impoisoned drugs:  
I fasten on my spectacles so close  
As nothing can any way offend my sight;  
Then, as I put a leaf within my nose,  
So put I rhubarb to avoid the smell,  
And softly as another work I paint. (i.621-632)

31Except for Michael's reference to ratsbane towards the end of the play, this is the third and last time poison is discussed, and I would like to argue that it should be considered to be a punchline. Arguably, it is hard to interpret Mosby's interjection other than farcically. It is as if he and Alice where *Tintin's* Thomson and Thompson interrogating Professor Calculus, echoing questions illustrating their ignorance and highlighting the Professor's quirkiness. More importantly, this *coda* sheds light on the *previous* references to poison, suggesting not a critical, but a humorous parallel between poison and theater.

32One recalls that the *first* mention of poison concluded with the conceit of Alice's "counterfeit". This may well be interpreted as a metaliterary hint, for poetry was, as recalled by Sidney, "an Art of Imitation: for so Aristotle termeth it in the word mimesis, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth to speake Metaphorically. A speaking Picture, with this end to teach and delight."<sup>28</sup> The term "counterfeit" also applies to actors, a point made by Margaret Tassi in her study on the figure of the painter in the play, in which she teases out the links between paintings, theater and Protestant iconoclasm.<sup>29</sup> Only Tassi fails to link these obvious metatheatrical references with the *second* mention of poison in the play, when Clarke gives the plotting adulterers a poisonous "powder", a term which also had metatheatrical connotations, as boy-actors used noxious "powders" to paint their faces to pose as women. Thus, we could perhaps reinterpret Alice's refusal of the poisoned painting as a humorous trait of the boy-actor refusing to see a picture of himself; or of the boy-actor refusing to have a "painter" work on his-her face/image. Similarly, we could interpret the discussion with Clarke as a metatheatrical joke in which the painter describes what the more delicate members of the audience might have been doing during the performance: namely, fastened on their spectacles and covered their noses to avoid the stench from the pit.

33If there is comedy in the play—and there is strong evidence that the play is successful only when there is *some* comedy—<sup>30</sup> it does not fall entirely within the purview of the comic duo, Shakebag and Black Will. Rather, it is subtly prepared by "a travesty of contemporary high tragedy"<sup>31</sup> in the opening scene, in which the piling of overly elaborate and ineffectual poisoned devices give us a hint of what is to come. Like poison, comedy

*Apocrypha Redivivus*, vol. sur *Arden of Faversham* (2013).

works in this play by degrees. It is at first barely noticeable, until the iteration of failures reveals the extent of the damage. It is only when the audience has had its fill of laughs that the *dénouement* can suddenly turn the play into a “lamentable tragedy”. The poison, which at first seemed to be a laughing potion and a cathartic remedy, ultimately turns deadly.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frances E. Dolan, “The subordinate(s) plot: Petty Treason and the forms of domestic rebellion”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 43, n. 3, 1992, pp. 317-340, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> One recent performance review noted that “the Rose in Bankside, advertise[d] it as ‘England’s Oldest Tragic Comedy’ (as opposed to tragicomedy, which of course the play is emphatically *not*).” Peter Kirwan, “Arden of Faversham (Em-Lou Productions) @ The Rose Theatre Bankside”, Blog, *The Bardathon*, June 23, 2010, [http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/pkirwan/entry/arden\\_of\\_faversham\\_1/](http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/pkirwan/entry/arden_of_faversham_1/) Kirwan does not pursue what may well be a futile debate on genre, especially considering a play penned in the early days of Elizabethan theater, when “dramatic genres were being self-consciously shaped and reshaped”, and one could conclude noncommittally that “the playwright keeps us guessing about what sort of play he is writing”. Alexander Leggatt, “Arden of Faversham”, *Shakespeare Survey*, vol. 36, 1983, pp. 121-133, quotes p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Martin White (ed.), *Arden of Faversham*, New Mermaids, London, A&C Black, 2007. All quotes from this edition.

<sup>4</sup> I have explored the heuristic importance of this question for early-modern drama in a previous study (*King Lear: William Shakespeare*, Paris, SEDES, 2008), following the footsteps of Kenneth Burke who liked to “prophesy after the fact”, i.e. explaining what happens based on what we already know has happened. See *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*, Scott L. Newstok (ed.), West Lafayette, Ind., Parlor Press, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed’s Chronicles: (Of) England, Scotland and Ireland*, vol. III, New York: AMS Press, 1976, p. 1063 (henceforth: III.1063).

<sup>6</sup> In the words of Leggatt, “We enter the world of *Tamburlaine* with a guide, as we do in, say, *The Jew of Malta* and *Romeo and Juliet*. We enter the world of *Arden of Faversham* without a guide, and we have to make of it what we can.” Leggatt, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> In criticism from the 1980s and 1990s, much emphasis was laid on historical, sociological and gender-based interpretations of the crime. Catherine Belsey claimed that, “read as a political event, Alice Arden’s crime was a defiance of absolutism and [...] constitutes evidence of the instability of central control at the time.” Catherine Belsey, “Alice Arden’s Crime”, *Renaissance Drama*, 1982, pp. 83-102, quote p. 100. Building on research by Garrett Sullivan, who showed that the Henrician Dissolution of the monasteries and popular condemnation of land-grabbers was still a pressing concern in Elizabethan England, Thomas Rist suggested recently that *Arden* should be described no longer as a “Domestic Tragedy”, but rather as a “Sacrilege Narrative”. Garrett A. Sullivan, “‘Arden Lay Murdered in That Plot of Ground’: Surveying, Land, and *Arden of Faversham*”, *ELH*, vol. 61, n. 2, 1994, pp. 231-252; Thomas Rist, “*Arden of Faversham* as ‘Sacrilege Narrative’”, *Notes and Queries*, vol. 57, n. 3, 2010, pp. 355-356. Other studies have shed more light on the religious background and significance of *Arden*: Ian McAdam, “Protestant Manliness in *Arden of Faversham*”, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 45, n. 1, 2003, pp. 42-72; Elizabeth Williamson, “The Uses and Abuses of Prayer Book Properties in *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Arden of Faversham*”, *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 39, n. 2, 2009, pp. 371-395.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Claude Mailhol, “Du Poison au poignard” : la représentation littéraire et théâtrale d’une héroïne meurtrière, Alice Arden”, *Cycnos*, vol. 23, n. 2. *Figures de femmes assassines: Représentations et idéologies*, 2006, <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/?id=623>; Marguerite A. Tassi, “Scandalous counterfeiting: iconophobia, poison, and painting in *Arden of Faversham*”, in *The Scandal of Images: Iconoclasm, Eroticism, and Painting in Early Modern English Drama*, Selinsgrove, Susquehanna University Press, 2005, pp. 130-151, quote p. 136. Work stressing the specifically literary or even linguistic aspects of the play are more seldom found, and they too fail to register the programmatic nature of the poison motif. Neill drew attention to the play’s “exploration of the fiercely nuanced languages of compliment, deference and social insult”, in Michael Neill, “‘This Gentle Gentleman’: Social Change and the Language of Status in *Arden of Faversham*”, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, vol. 10, 1998, pp. 73-97. Carol Mejia Laperle attempted to point out Alice’s rhetorical use of “kairos”, highlighting her “ability to improvise and invent” in “Rhetorical Situationality: Alice Arden’s Kairotic Effect in *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham*”,

*Apocrypha Redivivus*, vol. sur *Arden of Faversham* (2013).

*Women's Studies*, vol. 39, n. 3, 2010, pp. 175-193, quote p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> This includes Franklin and Michael, to a lesser degree, two characters often seen as serving a choric function or being a moral compass. If this is easily understood in the case of Michael, as he is quick to agree to plot against his master, critics have also pointed out Franklin's ambivalent and even criminal behavior. Ian McAdam even teased out the possibility that Franklin—the playwright's invention—may have been Arden's secret bed playfellow. "We might speculate on the playwright's indirect exploration of sexual tendencies officially regarded as unmentionable in his society [...]. We know the playwright has included one significant homosocial relationship—Arden's friendship with Franklin—not mentioned in any of the sources. Franklin's invitation to Arden to "lie with me at London all this term" (i.51) does not necessarily imply sexual connection [...]. But Franklin does disturbingly encourage Arden's "willful credulity" early in the play, and Arden oddly listens to a man with no apparent experience of the opposite sex." I. McAdam, p. 57. McAdam offers an additional suggestion based on Alice's kissing Franklin in front of Arden ("And then she kisseth him", i.411), arguing that "Since Alice is certainly not innocent, neither is this gesture, but the meaning of the tease is ambiguous: is she mocking Arden with her wandering adulterous tendencies or is she implying she recognizes Franklin as a sexual competitor, but one she does not fear?" *Ibid.* p. 58. Alice also claims "Then rides he straight to London; there, forsooth, / He revels it among such filthy ones, / As counsel him to make away his wife" (i.499-501).

<sup>10</sup> Eugene D. Hill, "Parody and History in *Arden of Feversham* (1592)", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 56, n. 4, 1993, pp. 359-382, quote p. 363-364. Theater, it must be recalled, was regularly defended against polemicists like Rankins and Gosson as a tool to weed out sin, moving criminals to confess their crimes, much in the way the mouse-trap in *Hamlet* is meant to confound Claudius. Revealingly, Belsey recalls that when Thomas Heywood wrote "in defense of the moral efficacy of stage plays, [...] of the three instances he cites of the providential operation of the drama, two concern women murdering their husbands." Belsey, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the concluding line of the title page claims the play has a moral objective, "[showing] the great malice and dissimulation of a wicked woman, the unsatiable desire of filthy lust and the shameful end of all murderers".

<sup>12</sup> Dolan, p. 332. Dolan's quip poses the question of dramatic composition. According to Julie Schutzman, "the plot of *Arden* [...] is somehow suspended between the idea of Arden's murder and its inevitable—but much deferred—realization." Julie R. Schutzman, "Alice Arden's Freedom and the Suspended Moment of *Arden of Faversham*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 36, n. 2, 1996, pp. 289-314, quote p. 290. She goes on to interpret this "stage of suspension" as "synonymous with the fulfillment of desire", p. 291. More prosaically, one could speak of dramatic suspense, although there is a risk in this play for it to fall flat given the repetitive nature of the plot.

<sup>13</sup> Holinshed, III.1062.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, London, William Ponsonby, 1595. All references are taken from the online transcription: <http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/defence.html>

<sup>15</sup> In this respect, I disagree with Frank Whigham's flat statement that "*Arden of Faversham* is a history play". See "Hunger and Pain in *Arden of Faversham*", *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 63-120, quote p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Holinshed, III.1063.

<sup>17</sup> Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), New York, Dover Publications, 1972, bk. VI, ch. 3, p. 67. As recalled by Katherine Armstrong, "Poison is [...] the weapon of choice for most female murderers in early-seventeenth century drama, as well as being a common method by which women commit suicide or are themselves dispatched." "Possets, Pills and Poisons: Physicking the Female Body in Early Seventeenth-century Drama", *Cahiers Elisabethains*, n. 61, 2002, pp. 43-56, quote p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> "Perhaps his desire to do things in the grand Italian manner is part of his social climbing [...] hankering after exotic devices like poisoned paintings and poisoned crucifixes, somewhat to the irritation of the more practical Alice." Leggatt, p. 130. Margaret Tassi also recalls that poisoning on stage was regarded as an "Italian art", pp. 134-135.

<sup>19</sup> Leggatt, p. 133. Holinshed, by contrast, spoke simply of a painter's "skills [...] in Faversham", III.1063.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Rodgers Watt, *Choosing Death: Suicide and Calvinism in Early Modern Geneva*, vol. LVIII, Kirksville, Truman State University Press, 2001.

*Apocrypha Redivivus*, vol. sur *Arden of Faversham* (2013).

21 On elements of popular piety, see E. Williamson.

22 John Calvin, *The Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the fifth book of Moses called Deuteronomy*, London, 1583, p. 138, quoted by David Davis, “Destructive Defiance: Catholic and Protestant Iconoclasm in England, 1550-1585”, Mario Caricchio, Giovanni Tarantino (eds.), *Cromohs Virtual Seminars*, 2006-2007, [http://www.cromohs.unifi.it/seminari/davis\\_iconoclasm.html?a?a](http://www.cromohs.unifi.it/seminari/davis_iconoclasm.html?a?a)

23 Eugene Hill has even suggested that, through the use of four coded terms (“complot, plat, plot, platform”), the play may have recalled a number of Catholic plots purportedly hatched by the late Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1587. “These four words, related phonically where not etymologically—complot, plat, plot, platform—appear in important and memorable contexts in the play, but nowhere in the Holinshed version of the murder. [...] The words had political and religious overtones.” E. D. Hill, p. 369.

24 Schutzman argues that it must also be interpreted as proof of the need for the character to control her self-fashioning: “When Mosby suggests a plot in which a poisoned portrait of Alice would serve as the murder weapon, Alice’s anxious response bespeaks an awareness of [the threat of being “read” according to standards other than her own]. In fact, this bizarre plan, which has no analogue in the Holinshed source material, provides a dense site for competing notions of the power of the gaze and the complicated interplay between subject and object.” J. R. Schutzman, p. 308.

25 Jacques Derrida, “La pharmacie de Platon”, in *La Dissémination*, Paris, Seuil, 1968, pp. 77-213.

26 Theophilus Philippus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim (Paracelsus), *Sieben Defensiones, Verantwortung über etliche Verunglimpfungen seiner Mißgönner (Sämtliche Werke)*, vol. XI, München, R. Oldenbourg, 1928, p. 138. See also my paper: “‘The sweet which is their poison’: Of Venom, Envy and Vanity in *Coriolanus*”, Charlotte Coffin and Laetitia Coussement-Boillot (eds.), *The Tragedy of Coriolanus de William Shakespeare*, Nantes, Éditions du Temps, 2006, pp. 141-158, in particular p. 144.

27 P. Kirwan, “*Arden of Faversham* (Em-Lou Productions) @ The Rose Theatre Bankside”; “*Arden of Faversham* @ The Emlyn Williams Theatre, Theatr Clwyd”, Blog, *The Bardathon*, February 20, 2010, [http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/pkirwan/entry/arden\\_of\\_faversham/](http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/pkirwan/entry/arden_of_faversham/)

28 Sidney, *op. cit.*

29 Following this train of thought, the poisoned painting thus becomes a Puritanical metaphor of theater, understood as a pernicious representation of sin. For the links between theater and poison, see also Tanya Pollard, *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, especially pp. 123 and ff.

30 David Ellis, “Black Comedy in Shakespeare”, *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 51, n. 4, 2001, pp. 385-403.

31 Hill, p. 368.

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