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This 'lamentable and true tragedy', as it is announced on its title page, dramatises a domestic murder of the sort that nowadays scandalises and thrills the readers of tabloid newspapers. Although the title advertises 'the great malice and dissimulation of a wicked woman' and her 'unsatiable desire of filthie lust', the unknown playwright with great dramatic skill and psychological insight manages to balance the motivations of all the main characters. Thomas Arden, one of the rapacious landlords so reviled in mid-Elizabethan social drama, was murdered at his own house in Faversham, Kent, in 1551. His murderers, it turned out, had been hired by his wife Alice, thrall to Mosby, who hoped to rise socially by marrying a rich widow. As the introduction to this edition shows, sexual and material covetousness is the central theme running through the play, which is commonly rated 'unquestionably the best of all Elizabethan domestic tragedies'.

Arden of Faversham Details

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Issicratea says

My initial inspiration to read this play was entirely serendipitous. I went to Faversham in Kent a few days ago—an atmospheric place—and saw the house in which the murder the play dramatizes took place. *Arden of Faversham* also ties in well with some of my recent academic preoccupations (early modern crime and punishment in relation to gender, though in Italy rather than England). Then, as soon as I started reading up on the play on the web, I realized it was actually highly topical—the Royal Shakespeare Company is performing it in Stratford this year for the first time since 1982, and parts of it seem to be edging their way into the Shakespearian canon, largely on the basis of computerized linguistic analysis carried out in the last few years.

I'm glad chance led me to this play. I found it very intriguing, and I can see why the RSC is reviving it. It dramatizes a murder that took place in 1551, which seems to have exerted an extraordinary fascination over the English public for some decades to come and to have inspired quite a significant body of literature, between chronicles, ballads, and this play. The victim was Thomas Arden, a one-time mayor of Faversham; the culprits a motley crew of conspirators including Arden's wife Alice; her lover, Mosby; a painter; a goldsmith; two servants in Mosby's household; and two disgruntled ex-soldier hit men with the irresistible names of Black Will and Loosebag. Because some of the culprits were in Arden's own household, the case was treated as "petty treason"—the domestic equivalent of political treason—and a special court was set up to try the murderers, who were all executed in various grisly ways.

The play, first published forty years after the crime, in 1592, and probably based on the lengthy account of the murder in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, is a very dark piece. Apart from the moralizing invented character of Franklin, Arden's friend, everyone is pretty tainted, from the jauntily feral hit men to the volatile, besotted Alice to Clarke the painter with his magnificent arsenal of poisonous portraits and crucifixes (which sadly never materialize on stage). Everyone is extraordinarily corrupt and corruptible, piling into the murder conspiracy with about as much deliberation and forethought that most of us put into accepting an invitation to a barbecue. Even Arden, the victim, is shown to be callous in his business dealings, though pitiful in his hapless love for his treacherous wife. The characters have quite a lot of complexity—not just Alice, Arden, and Mosby, but even relatively minor figures like Michael, the conscience-torn servant. I would think there would be a lot of meat here for a director; it's possible to imagine all kinds of ways in which the central love triangle could play out on stage.

It's hard not to get caught up in the authorship speculation when reading this play (apart from a young Shakespeare, the main big name suspects seem to be Marlowe and Kyd). As a layperson, I found the contention that Shakespeare wrote at least some of the central scenes in the play very plausible (there's a good essay by Ros King setting out the arguments for this in the recent *Oxford Handbook to Tudor Drama*). The language is certainly wonderful at points, and there's a stunningly complex and dramatic scene in this central segment between Alice and Mosby, which deepens their characterization—his, in particular—quite vertiginously, and which I imagine could be very powerful on stage. If Shakespeare was involved in the authorship—and presumably the acting—of the play, he certainly had a sense of humor (just in case we doubted it). The name of the second professional assassin, Loosebag in the historical sources, becomes Shakebag in *Arden of Faversham*. The first retains his original name, Black Will.

Resa says

An enchanting 17th century novel about a clueless husband, a conniving wife, and buffoonish villains.

The devilish wife is named Alice and she will stop at nothing in order to get her innocent husband, Arden, killed.

This simple play will make you enraged at Alice for her ridiculous changing moods. Alice is a reincarnation of Lady Macbeth and has the same enormous power on you. (There is a debate that this play was written by Shakespeare, and I agree, if only for the strong similarities between the two characters.)

You will definitely enjoy this wonderful play!

Majestic Terhune says

tsk tsk zea can't believe you rated this three stars

Amanda says

Black Comedy? Domestic Tragedy? City Drama? This is a play that looks simple on the surface but does some very clever and complex work underneath. Despite its name, its greatest achievement is to keep Arden himself estranged from the audience. This creates a space for other characters to do some naughty things. Black Will and Shakebag make this worth the read.

Lona says

Read this for my Love, Sex, and Power in Renaissance England course.

Gregory says

The play is fascinating with its emphasis on originality and humor, inspired by a real account. I found the characters equally insufferable to an extraordinary degree. A wonderful farce.

Matt says

An interesting look at what people were doing contemporary to Shakespeare. Not as elegant as Shakespeare, but still a pretty good read.

Christy says

Aside from Macbeth, my favorite play! Methinks a woman wrote it; hence, the author's name: anonymous.

Clare says

1.5 stars

Katie Mountain says

Black Will and Shakebag are the worst assassins in history.

Mike Jensen says

This is a very sturdy student edition of a fascinating comic play about murder.

Jack Crouse says

arden's wife alice, having an affair with mosby, decides to convince and encourage most of the play's characters to kill arden, who, through random lucky circumstances, repeatedly avoids death until an unlucky dice roll. it's written in unusually plain (it's thought to be a reported text, reconstructed from memory) but sometimes very effective language and focuses on the 3 main characters' psychologies. lots of attention is given to characters' social status. i recommend it.

Lynsey says

Highly enjoyable play that contains some beautifully resonant language. A great introduction to my violence and representation course, providing a clear insight into the sphere of private/domestic violence and its impact on the wider world.

Shaun says

A solid play, especially when considered outside of the greats of the period. The movement of the tragic action is definitely different than the more known tragedies of the period, especially in terms of pacing. The play does lack in its portrayals of things beyond character, where other plays in the period succeed in conveying settings and atmospheres. Since the play hones in on the characters, the characters are diverse and dynamic, with each main character really existing in the drama.

Oda WT says

Now one of my favourite English Renaissance/ Elizabethan plays, tied on top with The Merchant of Venice.
Deeply under appreciated.
