

Arden of Faversham: Failure of Arden's Marriage

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Abstract

The 16th c. tragedy, *Arden of Faversham*, depicts the murder of Arden by his wife and her lover. There are a number of critical issues that have been addressed by researchers in this tragedy like sexuality and domestic violence. But what I will focus on in this short paper is a trial of tracing the reasons that have led to the disastrous disintegration of the Ardens' marriage in a way of extracting lessons from old literary texts for the benefits of our daily lives. Discourse analysis will be used to explore the tragedy and the way it treats the disintegration of the Ardens' marriage. Hence, this article aims at analyzing the texts and exploring what causes the failure of the marriage in question. The topic is complicated and it is hard to hold an individual in the family accountable for what has taken place. There are factors that lead to the consequences that this family ends up with.

Keywords: Arden, Faversham, marriage, failure, reasons

1. Introduction

Published anonymously in 1592, *Arden of Faversham* is a tragedy that addresses themes like violence, domesticity, marriage, murder, and other related topics. The tragedy deals with the story of Thomas Arden and how he is killed by his wife, Alice, and her lover, Mosby. Researchers have addressed different themes related to this tragedy. Berek (2008) discusses sex and murder. Before this researcher, Belsey (1991) has an article entitled 'Alice Arden's Crime.' In addition, Sheeha (2019) tackles patriarchy in this tragedy. Bloom (2012) treats mastery and what she called "the game of Masculinity" in *Arden of Faversham*. Moreover, Martin (2001) has an article published in *Early Theatre*. It handles "A Patrilineal Crisis in *Arden of Faversham*" where psychological realism is used to analyze the character of Arden both historically and dramatically. All of these and other researchers have tried to address specific points in this tragedy such as gender, feminism, and patriarchy. In this article, I will benefit from other researchers, applying a dialogue analysis in order to explore the reasons that have led to the disastrous and tragic end of the Ardens' marriage; this paper will focus on the reasons as pictured and discussed in the tragedy. In other words, this paper will focus on the disintegration of the Ardens' family as presented in the play itself. By knowing the reasons and avoiding them in our life, we as writers and readers of literature aim at connecting literature with our daily life in a way that gives literature a meaningful interpretation and enhances a method of learning from the literary texts we read in our lives.

In this article, discourse analysis will be used. The text of this tragedy is analyzed in order to track the reasons that lead to the failure of the Ardens' marriage. Discourse of the whole text goes beyond the sentences, and explores the overall and general meanings conveyed in the context of the discourse. By using close reading, this article will lead mainly to exposing many connected and related problems that have influenced and affected the Ardens' marriage in a negative way. Burke (2020) defines close reading as "thoughtful, critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details or patterns in order to develop a deep, precise understanding of the text's form, craft, meanings, etc." (p. 2).

2. Discussion

As a tragedy, *Arden of Faversham* (original spelling: *Arden of Feversham*-see the Folger Library web site) ends up with what is known as domestic violence. Helgerson (1997) might be right when he argues that Alice's murder of Arden may "stand for an alternative history of England, a history focused not on the court and the battlefield... but on the household and the local community" (p. 157). Anyhow, it is about murder and treachery; this is the main point in this tragedy, but the question is why it ends up in such a way. What is most important in this short paper is marriage and how it ends up. Pratt (2014) argues that *Arden of Faversham* "features a wicked wife who engages in adultery and brings about the death of her husband," so the "marriage is doomed from the start and, thus, tragic" (pp. 31-32). There

are a number of reasons for the failure of Arden's marriage though apparently he does not recognize that his marriage is doomed. After analyzing the text, reasons appear as follows:

First of all, Arden listens to Franklin, his best friend, who unintentionally misleads and pushes him the wrong way. Franklin says—all further citations will be from Bayne, R. (Ed.). (1897). *Arden of Feversham*. London: J. M. Dent and Co.:

Be patient, gentle friend, and learn of me
To ease thy grief and save her chastity
.....
In any case be not too jealous,
Nor make no question of her love to thee. (I. i. 44-49)

Arden does as Franklin advises him. He promises Franklin: "I'll try it [i.e. the way of being patient]" (I. i. 54). In fact, the case of Arden's wife needs some strictness rather than patience as it appears in the play. Such a lenient reaction may lead to a problem as it is the case here. The influence of his friend here is clear; a friend may suggest something wrong because s/he is not experiencing the problem at the personal level. Apparently, Franklin is more concerned about reputation of both Arden and his wife.

In addition, Arden is ardent in his affection. He loves his wife unwisely; he says, "I cannot long be from thee, gentle Alice" (I. i. 87). His "fond love of Alice...leads him to 'winke at hir filthie disorder,' prolonging her sin and leading to his murder" (Wine, 1973, p. 149). His ardent love leads him to trust her blindly; he says, "The world shall see that I distrust her not" (I. i. 351). Thus, he passes over what she is doing with Mosby. His affection towards her gives him no chance to recognize the dangerous situation he is in while his wife is having an affair with Mosby. In this vein, Martin (2001) comments on how the play presents Arden

Instead it seems to caricature Arden as a victim of his own extreme emotions, agonizing over his wife's patent infidelity but always yielding to her implausible pleas of innocenc (p. 15).

Another reason for the failure of their marriage is Arden's tolerance. Though Arden knows from the beginning that Alice, his wife, is having an affair with Mosby, he tolerates this strong suspicion; he "tolerates an adultery he suspects or why he simply abandons his wife and home" (Dolan, 1994, p. 74). There is no doubt that adultery is the direct and main cause of the failure of marriage in the play. After their talk about Mosby, Alice says, "Had we no talk of Mosbie yesternight?" (I. i. 77), and Arden passes it over saying, "Therefore let it pass" (I. i. 80). Moreover, when Franklin suggests that Mosby should be denied entering Arden's house, Arden objects such a procedure, saying,

Forbear it! Nay, rather frequent it more.
The world shall see that I distrust her not.
To warn him on the sudden from my house
Were to confirm the rumour that is grown. (I. i. 350-53)

Apparently, Arden is concerned about rumours and what people talk about; it might be his social position that requires more cautiousness. He should not give people a chance of accusing him of being impotent as Martin (2001) indicates in his article "Arden winketh at his wife's lewdness, & why!": A Patrilineal Crisis in *Arden of Feversham* (p. 21). In this vein, Williamson (2009) argues, "When he chooses to tolerate the affair between Alice and Mosby, Arden abdicates his proper role in the household" (p. 392), and concedes his authority as a result. On the contrary, deciding to stop such an affair is the best way to handle this case.

It is worth mentioning that Arden has a weak character. He is persuaded and deceived easily. At the beginning, he does as Franklin advises him; Arden says, "I'll try it" (I. i. 54). Then, when his wife argues, "Had we no talk of Mosbie yesternight" (I. i. 77), he submits to her. At last, Mosby convinces Arden that he "never meant more to solicit her [Alice]" (I. i. 329), and he is in Arden's house "for [his] sister's sake, her [Alice's] waiting-maid/ and not for hers" (I. i. 335-36). Arden accepts Mosby's justification; he addresses Mosby, "The deadly hatred of my heart's appeased, / And thou and I'll be friends if this prove true (I. i. 340-41). He is easily deceived by Mosby; Martin (2001) refers to what he calls "Arden's apparent gullibility" (p. 23). Furthermore, he apologizes for what has happened with Mosby. This weakness in his character helps to end up his marriage. Indeed, it is his "Arden's already vulnerable patriarchal authority" that gives Alice and Mosby a chance to "act strategically as subjects with the social and (apparent) financial power to dominate and manipulate" Arden by "cuckolding him" (Martin, 2001, p. 32). In Arden's absence, Mosby

plays the “husband’s part” (I. i. 638), “usurping Arden’s right to his household and wife’s body” (Hamamra 2018, p. 93). This is what has emphasized in the play; when Alice cries after her husband’s death which “torments [her] at the heart” (V. i. 276), at that moment Mosby responds, “It shall not long torment thee, gentle Alice; / I am thy husband; think no more of him” (V. i. 277-78). At this moment, she realizes the importance of having a husband with a social rank in her society; Mosby has manipulated her, too.

It must not be forgotten that it is Arden's kindness that reconciles him to Alice and Mosby; he points out to his heart, saying, “Ah, Franklin, here it lies / That will not out till wretched Arden dies” (III. i. 32-33). This kindness doesn't let him take a direct and straightforward attitude towards his wife's infidelity. Arden does not succeed in governing his house; “this failure is registered in the loss of his authority over his wife” (Sheeha, 2019, p. 3). After a fight with Mosby, Arden accepts Alice’s implausible excuses and begs her to forgive his “fault”:

Then pardon me, sweet Alice, and forgive this fault!

Forget but this and never see the like.

Impose me penance, and I will perform it. (IV. Iv. 116–18)

More than this unacceptable behavior, he invites Mosby to his dinner. She has some sort of power over him. There is no doubt that he is concerned about her wealth as the play presents.

Obviously Arden's interest is in land, not in marriage. The first lines of the play tell us about the gift of the Duke of Somerset; Arden is given "all the lands of the Abbey of Feversham" (I. i. 5). Accordingly, Arden insists, “As for the lands, Mosbie, they are mine / By letters patents from his Majesty” (I. i. 301-02).

On the other hand, Greene, a landlord, claims Faversham and regrets, "I had rather die than lose my land" (I. i. 519). His behavior towards Alice is justified in a way when Martin (2001) suggests that “Arden’s motive becomes appeasing Alice for the sake of the financial and social advantages she brings with her through her family” (p. 14). Hence, this marriage is doomed from the beginning; Arden marries Alice because of her riches and apparently she agrees to become his wife because of his social rank. The Ardens’ marriage is a marriage of personal interests more than anything else; love and respect have no place in this deal.

Furthermore, Arden is a man who never looks for the consequences of his wife's affair with Mosby. He knows they privately meet; he tells his close friend Franklin:

And they have privy meetings in the town:

Nay, on his finger did I spy the ring

Which at our marriage-day the priest put on. (I. i. 16-18)

His knowledge of their private meetings “stresses the sense of his loss of authority over his wife registered in her abandonment of her house and wandering about town with her lover” (Sheeha, 2019, p. 4). The fatal thing is that he doesn't take action against Mosby; moreover, Arden becomes worried about “the rumour that is grown” (I. i. 353) as discussed before.

So, his actions are no more than reactions to what has taken place and circulated among “all the knights and gentlemen of Kent” (I. i. 344). In addition, he tells Mosby that he "will lie at London all this term" (I. i. 51). His absence in London gives Alice and Mosby some time to strengthen their relationship and plan Arden's murder. And where is this? Unfortunately, all this chaos is taking place inside his house. Leaving the house for Alice and her lover indicates a “disorder in the household; it [is] the result of [Arden’s] misrule, his concupiscence, and dishonest land dealings” (King, 2012, p. 637). Having the space and place, Alice expresses herself as follows:

Mosbie’s arms

Shall compass me, and, were I made a star,

I would have none other spheres but those.

There is no nectar but in Mosbie’s lips! (V. i. 151-54)

One of the reasons that have led to this marital disintegration is the lack of good friends. The lack of a good consultant makes it easier for the traitors to accomplish their plans in this play. Arden confides only in Franklin, who accidentally pushes him to the wrong way. In addition, the traitors are cautious to keep everything secret; when Alice talks with Greene about their plans Mosby warns her, “To make it open unto Arden's self / And bring thyself and me to ruin both” (I. i. 581-82). According to the title page, Arden is the victim of treachery. His wanton wife loves Mosby and hires two men to kill him.

In addition, Arden is not a man of action. Arden talks about his gentility: "I am by birth a gentleman of blood" (I. i. 36), at the time he is supposed to take action against the one who continues "to violate [his] dear wife's chastity" (I. i. 38). He feels smugly superior when he compares himself with Mosby, who is an "injurious ribald" (I. i. 37). In his introduction of the play, Wine points out that Mosby is "a black swart man" whereas Arden is "of a tall and comelie personage" (Ixx). The play refers to Mosby as "a botcher once" (I. i. 321), a "base peasant" (I. i. 199), "a cheating steward, and based-minded peasant" (I. i. 324), and "a mean artificer, that low-born name" (III. V. 77). All these descriptions suggest his inferiority and probably his blackness. Anyhow, Arden might be right that he is a gentleman, but as a gentle man he is to take action in such a situation to stop his wife's affair with Mosby.

Another factor that dooms this marriage is Alice's infidelity and lust. The title page of Wine's (1973) Edition tells that Arden "was most wickedly murdered by the means of his disloyal and wanton wife who for the love she bare to one Mosby, hired two desperate ruffians Blackwill and Shakbag to kill him." Though Arden subconsciously knows that Alice "is rooted on her wickedness" (III. i. 9), he does nothing to stop her. Chapman (1956) finds Alice to be "a female Faust" who "damns herself willingly," (PP. 15-16) while McCluskie (1999) describes Alice as "the ultimate monstrous, unruly woman," (p.36) who "rejects the institution of marriage" (Belsey, 1991, p. 133). For Lake (2002), Alice represents the "archetypal whore" (p. 680) who is driven by lust. According to Clark (2018) "*Arden of Faversham's* central protagonist, Alice Arden, is easily understood in terms of fully liberated passion and appetite" (p. 119). Moreover, Alice's sexual freedom allows her to "challenge the whole social order" (LaPerle, 2010, p. 182). All these researchers find in Alice a female who, in Martin's (2001) words, "skillfully exploits the role of victimized wife and sexual rebel" (p. 15). Despite her lust and sexuality, Alice does not want to leave any trace behind her according to the play; one danger of the affair is that she may have an illegitimate child. Hence, she warns Mosby, "I pray thee, Mosbie, let our springtime wither; / Our harvest else will yield but loathsome weeds" (III. v. 66-7). Clearly, this wanton wife is caustious of the consequences of her lustful risk; she wants to have everything under control.

Apparently both Arden and Alice are sexually incompatible; Martin (2001) stresses that "Alice seems also to hint at her husband's impotence, from her own perspective" (p. 20); Alice wonders what "could once have drawn you [Arden] from these arms of mine" (IV. i. 16)

Earlier in the play, Alice addresses Arden,

Husband, what mean you to get up so early?
Summer-nights are short, and yet you rise ere day.
Had I been wake, you had not risen so soon. (I. i. 57-9)

All these extracts and "melancholy" Arden has indicate that there is something wrong with Arden's sexuality; Alice wants him to stay with her in bed for a longer time. Her argument may refer to some kind of 'impotence' Arden has as discussed earlier in this article.

Finally, for Alice, "Love is a god, and marriage is but words" (I. i. 101). Marriage means nothing to her. Because she does not love Arden, she finds it easy to have an affair with Mosby. She insists that "He [Mosby] shall be mine" (I. i. 103). This affair is one of the reasons that the marriage ends in adultery and murder. It is the heart that is usurped by Mosby; she makes it clear in

Sweet Mosbie is the man that hath my heart,
And he usurps it, having nought but this—
That I am tied to him [Arden] by marriage.
Love is a god, and marriage is but words,
And therefore Mosbie's title is the best. (I. i. 98-102)

Hence, Alice "imagines the death of her husband as the necessary condition for her emotional fulfillment" (Clark, 2018, p. 119). In fact, Arden's death does not mean Alice's ultimate freedom; in this sense, Belsey (1991) argues that Alice will not escape the social institution of marriage because Mosby will finally confine her to a "new form of subjection" (pp. 147-148). In addition, in all her acts, Alice needs someone to help her; see how she relies on other men in her plan to get rid of her husband. So, in trying to escape from her role as a wife, Alice tells Mosby that she is "to rule [her]self" (IV. i. 87); indeed, she substitutes Arden with Mosby who "well may be the master of the house" (I. i. 640).

All these factors lead to the settled end of Arden's marriage though he doesn't recognize their inevitable outcome. Though this marriage is doomed and the authority head, i.e. Arden, is murdered, yet his tragic end does not mean the

destruction and/or elimination of the social system that glorifies the patriarchal authority. In a recent article about 'unruly women' and 'failed patriarchs' in the early modern period, Amussen (2017) has observed that "[f]rom the top of society to the bottom, [...] the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries are full of instances that suggest a collapsing patriarchal order" (p. 7); one of these instances is Alice of *Arden of Faversham*. Howar (2018), in her turn, argues that Alice does "create agency through crafting opportunities that place [her] in positions of power, but society's norms restrict [her] agency and [she is] punished for transgressing from [the] traditional roles" (p. 2). Anyhow, "Alice cannot escape the social boundaries that have been established for her, and by being killed demonstrates what happens when women go outside of these rules (Howar, 2018, p. 7). This is what happens at the end; all killers are punished because the social system should prevail at any cost.

3. Conclusion

After using discourse analysis, the article aims at exploring and presenting the factors that lead to the failure of the Ardens' marriage in the 16th c. tragedy, *Arden of Faversham*. This article tends to be educational and social in a trail to make a connection related to our daily lives. One of the lessons is to consider the mistakes done by the Ardens and trace reasons that have led to the disastrous disintegration of their marriage. In the above discussion, the main reasons of the failure of the marriage have been addressed; they are like Arden's weak character, his tolerance, Alice's infidelity, and having bad friends. Such factors might be found at any time and any good couple should pay attention to them whenever they look for everlasting marriage.

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