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Arden the Aristocrat: Tensions Between Feudal and Capitalist Models in *Arden of Faversham*

In *Arden of Faversham*, Arden's role as a merchant and landlord is of great importance to the motivations of the conspirators who seek to destroy him for various personal gains. Through an interpretive lens, a critical reader may view Arden as a character deserving sympathy: a sole protagonist under attack from seemingly every personal and professional relation. An interesting question debated amongst critics is whether the character of Arden is one that a contemporary audience would feel empathy towards as an upstanding, middle class patriarch surrounded by murderous intent, or whether they would root for his destruction. As the play is based on the historical accounts of the actual crime, the outcome does not hold the audience in suspense. The dialogue and narrative choices of the anonymous author, therefore, have particular significance since these choices distinguish *Arden*, a domestic tragedy, from a historical retelling of the facts of the murder case (such as Holinshed's account). Given the pivotal role that Arden's status as a landlord plays in developing his character, the dialogue concerning land acquisition and Arden's exchanges with his tenants are of particular interest to a discussion on his character.

The play was written at the end of the sixteenth century in England, at which time market capitalism and enclosure were marking the end of the feudal system which had governed class interactions for centuries. The resulting tension thrust two competing models into the English culture of the time: feudal and capitalist. These tensions are

exerted in the play through the materialistic motives of both Arden and the conspirators. Since Arden's land acquisitions are prominent and central to the plot, I will examine period pamphlets from the turn of the century concerning land acquisition and wealth, as well as religious views on acquisition and accumulation. Period conceptions of land acquisition and accumulation of wealth coincide with Arden's character such that his character can be said to be a composite of the archetypal Elizabethan era landlord; this representation would resonate negatively with a period audience and complicates the assumption that Arden's character would evoke sympathy from a viewer of the play. *Arden of Faversham* would register with a period audience on a key level: it is a social commentary which strongly sympathizes with the plight of the oppressed commoner through its representations of landlords while simultaneously condemning the murder of the landlord figure.

I. Popular Conceptions of Aristocratic Landlords

Moralistic pamphleteers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century who wrote on wealth and land accumulation bombarded their audience with imagery of a vengeful God; while the pamphlets were presumably addressed to all classes, their moralistic tracts targeted the wealthy aristocrats who were apart from God, or who had forsaken celestial concerns for earthly gain. Such is the case in Thomas Cooper's pamphlet *The Worldlings Adventure* of 1619, in which Cooper describes "the fearefull estate of *Worldings*; adventuring, and working out their own damnation, by their unsatiable and deceitfull hunting after worldly profit" (introd.). Cooper's treatise on the accumulation of wealth centers on the theory that wealth is a blessing from God, and that "it seemeth good to our God to give some more, that they may be stewards for others; so

also to give some lesse, that there may be a maintenance of the holy fellowship, by this mutuall communication of each others gifts" (31-2). Other than Cooper's questionable use of the word "some" (since the peasantry far exceeded the aristocracy in numbers) his argument is sympathetic to commoners through his assertion that those who possess the greatest amount of wealth are bound by religious obligation to act as stewards, ministering to the needy of their land. This sentiment seems universal amongst the pamphleteers I surveyed, and oftentimes resembles a demand more than a suggestion.

This popular conception of the wealthy ministering to the poor and afflicted is proven to be more of an exception than an everyday reality according to the pamphleteers. Cooper's pamphlet is primarily a moralistic denunciation which warns the reader of the danger of an obsession with worldly wealth: "The minde that is always heaving after earthly things, is an easie and sure prey to Satans malice. The desire of riches is the roote of all evill, exposing to tentation and snare of Satan" (11).

Whereas Cooper deals in abstract and allegory, Robert Crowley intently disparages the aristocracy and vehemently argues against the accumulation of wealth and land. Crowley dispels his detractors in *An Information and Petition against the opressours of the pore Commons of this Realme* by immediately declaring that he does not desire a communal society, but that he "woulde wysh that no man wer suffered to eate, but such as would laboure in theyr vocation and calling." While he consistently decries the wickedness of "possessioners," those in possession of property and wealth, he suggests a common remedy throughout the pamphlet: "If the possessioners woulde consider themselves to be but stuardes, and not Lordes over theyr possessions: thys oppression would sone be redressed." As support for his claim that "possessioners"

should use their wealth to minister to the poor, he ascribes distribution of wealth as the providence of God and even states that God "hath made the possessioners but Stuardes of his ryches, and that he wyl hold a streygh accompt with them for the occupiyng and bestoweynge of them." Since only those persons who labor should benefit from wealth, and since the wealth bestowed on the aristocracy is to be distributed to those in need, Crowley asserts that the aristocracy's labor should be the appropriate disbursement of God's wealth to those in need.

In *The Way to Wealth*, Crowley levels specific charges at the aristocracy in satiric fashion by suggesting that the cause of "sedicion" is the oppression of commoners, and that they would cease complaining if the aristocracy gave them no cause to. Unlike *An Information and Petition* which was an open letter directed at parliament, *The Way to Wealth* outlines specific offenses of the aristocracy and incites the oppressed commoners to identify and resist oppressors: "They take our houses over our headdes, they bye our groundes out of our handes, they reyse our rentes, they leavie great (yea unreasonable) fines, they enclose oure commens […] in such sorte, that we know not whyche way to turne us to lyve. Very need therefore constrayneth us to stand up against them." Crowley often compares aristocratic landlords to shepherds, whose responsibility is to tend to their flock; the betrayal of this Christ like responsibility adds to the egregiousness of the oppression of commoners. As such, a longing for the return of the feudal responsibility of lordly protection over the commoners emerges in these pamphlets, and the tone of condemnation of harsh, capitalistic landlords is central to every accusation.

Despite condemnation of the wealthy in general, there is one practice in particular that angers Crowley: that of accumulation of wealth and hereditary bequeathal. He warns

the aristocracy to "Destroye not [their] own soules to enriche [their] heirs" (*Information and Petician*). In a similar warning, he warns the wealthy to "Grudge not to let the people growe in wealth under you, neither do you invent waies to kepe them bare" (*The Way to Wealth*). Crowley repeatedly suggests in his pamphlets that the systemic deprivation of the commoners' land and wealth is designed to perpetually enrich the aristocracy and entrench their progeny in the position of oligarchs. This seems to be a widely held fear, as the "Prayer for Landlords" in the *Book of Private Prayer* asks God to:

> give [landlords] grace also to consider that they are but straungers, pilgrims in thys worlde[…]that they remembryng the shorte continuance of their lyfe may be content, with that that is sufficient, and not joyne house to house, nor couple lande to land, to the impoverishing of other, but so behave themselves in letting out their tenements, lands and pastures, that after this lyfe they maye be received into everlasting dwelling places […]"

Cooper warns against obsessive accumulation, but suggests an alternative where persons may "lawfully desire Riches" so long as "Private gaine eat not out the Publique" (63-64). Public good is manifested in these pamphlets through a plea to the aristocracy to (at most) distribute their vast wealth amongst the less fortunate, and to (at least) not remove from the commoners' possession the land which they farm for subsistence.

The prospect of God being the provider of everything is present in all pamphlets, and specified succinctly by Crowley when he asserts that "The whole earth therfor (by byrth right) belongeth to the children of men. They are all inheritours therof indifferently

by nature" (*Information and Peticion*). A similar sentiment is expressed in the "Prayer for Landlords," and the position of landlord is continually rephrased in these pamphlets as "God's tenant." What then is to be the equalizing force which will restore the pamphleteers' desired feudalistic social order of lordly protection of the commoners? Crowley's advice to the peasant is to "kepe thy selfe in obedience and suffer al this oppression patiently" and wait for God to deliver the commoners from their oppressors; the potential method of divine delivery is any number of usurpations of authority, including monarchical reformation, foreign invasion, as well as the sudden death of the landlord at the height of his wickedness (*The Way to Wealth*). In no way, however, does any pamphlet suggest direct intervention by killing or deposing one's own landlord.

From the pamphleteers, we can construct a list of cardinal violations by which we can surmise whether a tenant would find fault with a landlord. Insatiable greed is the first determiner; this trait leads to the distasteful practice of accumulation of wealth through eviction of tenants and consolidation of lands, ultimately producing a lineage of capitalistic oligarchs. Secondly, failure to minister to and redistribute wealth amongst those beneath you is a serious affront to the tenants. The redistribution of wealth is equated by the pamphleteers to the feudal model where landlords prevented their tenants from destitution (or at least starvation). Thirdly, ignorance or disregard of the common good in favor of private gain is a serious violation; this is exhibited in landlords through enclosure or denial of public lands to commoners for use in subsistence farming. In order to understand Arden's motives, we can apply this framework to his character and evaluate his performance and subsequent perception among period audiences.

II. Arden's Role as Landlord in Faversham

Arden acquires his monastic land through legal means and holds all legal titles necessary to execute his desires on his land, but the ethics of such a maneuver suggest that the legalities play no role in promoting a sympathetic reading of his character or other would be landlords in the play. As a character, Arden exhibits every facet of an undesirable landlord suggested by the pamphleteers. Concerning Arden's insatiable desire for earthly wealth, Greene argues that "Desire of wealth is endless in his mind, and he is greedy-gaping still for gain. Nor cares he though young gentlemen do beg, so he may scrape and hoard up in his pouch" (23). This insatiable greed is confirmed to be aimed at producing an inheritance when Alice states, "My saving husband hoards up bags of gold to make our children rich, and now is he gone to unload the goods that shall be thine [Mosby's]" (12-13)[1]. Arden is accused by Greene of driving him to beggary, and later Reede makes strong accusations of privation against Arden, speaking of "his wife and children" who he leaves "needy and bare" when going out to sea (81). Arden is accused by Reede of denying him land that he could use for subsistence farming, and thus is accused of ignoring the common good.

All of these accusations build Arden's character as an archetypal capitalistic landlord, but to what purpose? James R. Keller, in his detailed examination of Arden's land acquisition and interaction with his tenants, suggests that Greene may have been competing for the Abbey land and points to the fact that Greene may have been a lease monger, selling the rights to the land before legally obtaining them (22); according to the framework devised from period pamphlets, this would make Green just as unscrupulous

[1] The exact meaning of "our children" is ambiguous, as it could mean Arden and Alice's children (whose existence is confirmed by the Holinshed account) or possibly the future children of Mosby and Alice. Regardless of the parentage of the children, the money is posited as an inheritance sum by the author.

as Arden. Keller also notes that "It became common practice for the new owners of the monastic lands to evict peasants who farmed the commons, thus leaving them destitute and homeless," and suggests that while Arden's "activities are certainly self-serving[…]they do not seem to be overly criminal or wicked, and in some cases, they may only reflect the inexorable economic and cultural transformations that often victimize society's most needy members" (22-3). While this position seems valid in a current reading, the practices represented in the play which accompany the "inexorable economic and cultural transformations" (presumably the aforementioned tension between feudal and capitalistic models) would most likely seem quite wicked to a period audience. Consider Crowley's use of the word "shepard" to describe landlords, or Reede's strongly worded plea to Arden to return the Abbey subsistence farming plot to his wife and children: "For Christ's sake, let them have it!" (*Arden* 81). The tension between a feudal system of lordly protection and a capitalistic system of eviction and accumulation would certainly register with the audience in the presentation of Reede's pathetic petition and ensuing rage at its denial.

The assumption that the *position* of landlord is reviled in the play is not necessarily true. Frances Dolan points out that "Arden, simply by being the master, stands in the most dangerous, desired, central place in the dramatic and social structures" of the play (330). Dolan's assertion that Arden is the focal point of the subordinates' ambitions is valid, considering that he is the man who possesses much of what everyone wants and his elimination is essential in bringing about each conspirator's goal. Arden, therefore, need not do anything in the action of the play in order to be the subject of the assassination plots and, by extension, "can remain central without engaging in either

positive or negative action simply by holding the place that stands for privilege and power…" (Dolan 330). David Attwell argues a similar position, asserting that land acquisition is the enterprise of the emergent middle class and that "Arden is therefore in the bottleneck, which position—compounded by the general fetisization of status—is more than usually dangerous" (338-9). It is the acquisition of the status which seems to be critical, and unaddressed, within these two arguments. Although Attwell and Dolan make convincing arguments that Arden's status alone makes him the target of the conspirators, the playwright constantly chooses to include details which would vilify Arden to a contemporary audience such as the aforementioned spurning of Reede or the running commentary on Arden's ambition and obsession with relentless accumulation.

As seen in the pamphlets, landlords' actions are much more highly prized by commoners when they result in positive relations with tenants, no matter which party is legally correct. In his borderline encomium of Arden, Keller points out key problems with the legal interpretations of Greene and Reede's claims to the Abbey lands, asserting that that Arden legally obtained their use and has every right to deny them access to the land. Negative land acquisition policies in the play are not strictly limited to Arden, however. When Mosby is speculating on the potential ill gotten gains he will procure after Arden's demise, he surmises that he will allow Greene to farm the Abbey land for a while, before "smother[ing] him to have his wax; such bees as Green must never live to sting" (57). Likewise, he intends to eliminate Michael and the painter by "cast[ing] a bone to make these curs pluck out each other's throat," thus diverting their suits for reward away from himself after he "sit[s] in Arden's seat" (54). Clearly, this speculative soliloquy mimics the cardinal violations outlined by the pamphleteers, and hints at the

systemic reproduction of oppression that comes with usurpation of the landlord position, and not necessarily the position itself. Although the position of landlord within Faversham is highly sought after and associated with negative consequences for the tenants, the author of *Arden* makes a stylistic choice which demonstrates that not every landlord in England conforms to these oppressive standards.

III. Lord Cheiny

The Holinshed account of the murder tells us that the scene where Arden and Franklin encounter Lord Cheiny on the road back to Faversham did not take place exactly as the anonymous playwright of *Arden* describes. Arden did meet "diverse gentlemen of his acquaintance" on the road, but Cheiny is not named as one of them (Holinshed 1064). The reason given by Holinshed for Arden's trip to Lord Cheiny's estate is that Alice intercepted one of Arden's servants delivering a letter from Cheiny, and "tooke the letter and kept it, willing hir man to tell his maister, that he had a letter delivered to him by Sir Thomas Cheinie, and that he had lost it; adding that he thought it best that his maister should go the next morning to Sir Thomas, because he knew not the matter" (1064). The historical account implicates Alice as effecting Arden's trip, later stating that she (just as in *Arden*) instructs Black Will and Shakebag to kill Arden while he is on the road.

The meeting between Arden and Lord Cheiny on the road to Faversham is therefore a stylistic inclusion by the author. The interaction of characters in this encounter is vital to the understanding of the interplay between feudal and capitalistic tensions within the play. The playwright establishes from the outset of the encounter that Arden and Franklin are the feudal servants to Lord Cheiny, with both men greeting him in the most deferential tone possible: upon Cheiny's entry, Arden proclaims "Your

honour's always! Bound to do you service," and Franklin likewise states that he is "highly bound" to Cheiny (67, cf. 70,71). Cheiny immediately shows his generosity by inviting Arden and Franklin to dine with him at his Isle of Sheppey estate, to which Arden must ask "pardon" and plea that "the occasion [preventing his attendance] is great, or else [he] would *wait* on [Cheiny]" (67, emphasis added). This invitation serves the dual purpose of demonstrating Cheiny's beneficence and generosity towards his feudal subjects; the combination of charity and social superiority places him in the role of lordly protector that the pamphleteers so desperately seek to propagate. Although Franklin and Arden are compelled to visit Cheiny's estate, there are to attend a feast which, presumably, would be a pleasant duty[2].

In this same scene, Cheiny also briefly discourses with Black Will, ordering one of his servants to give him a crown and warning Black Will to change his criminal ways (68). The transaction of money from the lordly protector figure to the commoner symbolically represents the type of redistribution of wealth mentioned by the pamphleteers. Cheiny's motives behind this transaction are reformatory, and they would enhance contemporary perceptions of his character despite the criminal nature of Black Will. Interestingly enough, the amount given by Cheiny to Arden's assassin (one crown) is also mentioned in Bradshaw's description of Black Will in an earlier scene: "for a crown he'll murder any man" (30). Thus, through the character of Lord Cheiny, whom the author deliberately interjects into this encounter, we are shown an image of the

[2] For a further discussion of the desire of feudal bonds by commoners, please see Attwell pp. 331-2. While we agree on the desire of commoners for a reversion to feudalistic relations with the aristocracy, his evidence is drawn from Marx's theory in *The Communist Manifesto* while I draw the basis for my argument from the pamphleteers' arguments. In essence, I assert that the societal "nostalgia" that Attwell speaks of is actually a forceful sentiment enacted through historical written documents that directly petition capitalistic landlords to exhibit feudal protectiveness and generosity, and not merely commoners' reminiscence of times past.

aristocracy that is very similar to the feudalistic figure of a lordly protector composed by the pamphleteers.

IV. Conclusion

The competing models of a feudalistic aristocracy that assumes the acts as lordly protectors of the commoners and a capitalistic aristocracy that evicts and deprives their tenants through obsession with worldly gain are juxtaposed in *Arden* in such a way that the audience would be highly aware of the tensions played out through the characters' actions. The close conformity of Arden's character to the cardinal violations of feudal obligation set forth in Cooper and Crowley's pamphlets as well as the *Book of Private Prayer* demonstrate that he fits the composite of a landlord who is obsessed with wealth and acquisition and devoid of concern for the common good. Likewise, the inclusion of Lord Cheiny as an example of a feudalistic landlord further complicates a sympathetic reading of Arden's character by providing an example of a model feudal landlord that the pamphleteers laud so heavily.

The play's plot ultimately ends in the death of Arden and all of the conspirators, leaving the play's only neutral aristocrat, Franklin, to deliver the epilogue. As Dolan points out, the failure to privilege either the subordinates or master in the play results in everyone loosing (334). Attwell also contends that the play does not result in a victory for anyone, but instead "endorse[s] the replacement of corrupt patronage with the principles of proper title and ethical constraint" (338). I agree with both statements, but assert that the method of Arden's deposition is not condoned by either the playwright or the pamphleteers as appropriate. Crowley explicitly states that commoners should suffer their oppression and wait for God's deliverance, not kill the landlord and hope for a

resolution. If anything, the play is completely ambiguous, especially concerning Reede and his wife and children, who are arguably the characters who the commoners would have most identified with. While *Arden* is indisputably vital in the domestic tragedy genre, it does not provide any solutions to the Elizabethan commoner concerning aristocratic, capitalist oppression.

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