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**WE'RE ALL MAD HERE: ANTI-CAPITALIST CRITICISM IN ARDEN OF
FAVERSHAM**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

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We're All Mad Here: Anti-Capitalist Criticism in *Arden of Faversham*

In early modern England, the shift from a feudal to a capitalist economy created opportunities for social mobility that had not existed previously. While the nobility was mostly untouched by these changes, movement among the gentry, citizenry, and the commons became more frequent. Often, those moving up did so at the expense of others. In the anonymously written, *Arden of Faversham*, Arden is one of the recently landed gentry whose newfound wealth and status earns him several rivals. While the main plot focuses on the domestic conflict between Arden and his wife, Alice, the underlying class conflict between gentry and commons that emerges from the opportunity for social mobility in the new economy reflects the social and economic anxieties of emerging capitalism in early modern English society. Although there is a denouncement of Arden in the epilogue, Arden's weak characterization and subsequent victimization throughout the play fails to convincingly vilify him as a greedy landlord. Instead, the greed that drives Arden's conspirators and their resulting executions serves as a warning against the dangers of social mobility in an emerging capitalist economy.

Early modern England was a period of drastic political, social and economic changes. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, Catholicism dictated a rigid hierarchal social structure that supported the feudal economic system. Each person "had specialized roles that were fixed in function and place and based upon birth. None was to usurp another's role; to do so was mortal

sin and rebellion” (Beier 53). A common metaphor during the medieval period for societal interdependence was that of a human body; in which each part of the body could only perform its specific function else the whole body would fail (Beier 56). The duty of a landlord to the peasants and vice versa created a moral economy of dependency. In the moral economy it was the responsibility of the landlord to provide for their tenants, providing for their survival and being kind and fair; in return, it was the duty of the commons was to use their skills for the good of the community. In particular, it was expected of landlords “not to raise rents, question customary rights, create large leasehold farms, or enclose the commons” (Beier 55). Following the Protestant Reformation, lands belonging to the Catholic Church and Catholic sympathizers were redistributed to certain non-nobility, elevating their status and creating a class of landed gentry. While the moral ideal for the economy was pervasive, Elizabethans “were turning away from the prescriptive and idealized picture of the early and mid-Tudor periods to a more descriptive one... [to] that of a society of orders or ranks, which placed greater emphasis on political power, social mobility, and conflicts between orders” (Beier 57). Additionally, expanding trade and growing urban centers lead to the development of a citizen class of merchants and artisans. While these two new groups benefited from an increasingly competitive market and new opportunities for generating wealth, the poor were witnessing the erosion of their livelihood.

Along with these changes, population increase and limited resources caused by inflation and periodic harvest failures during the sixteenth and seventeenth century created a tense economic atmosphere and anti-landlord sentiments. In particular, new landowners who were not tied down by long-standing leases or moral obligations to their tenants were able to take advantage of the people living on their land. The three primary complaints against early modern

landlords were rent raising, transformation of copyholds into leaseholds, and enclosures. All of these actions displaced poor tenants from their homes and livelihood, which led to an increase in vagrancy. Population growth increased the demand for land, allowing landlords to profit by raising entry fees and rent while shortening lease agreements. Landlords also took advantage of the changing economy to change the type of leases granted to tenants from copyholds to leaseholds. Copyholds were a feudal land tenure that granted specific tenants certain rights and obligations by granting the tenant a copy of the land's deed. In contrast, leaseholds were controlled by the landowner and could be bought and sold on the open market. Landlords could negotiate with the tenant in order to convert the land, but they could also avoid arbitration by buying the land attached to the copyhold and repurposing it without reaching an agreement with the tenant (Wrightson 131). Another way landlords could increase profits on their properties was to enclose land that had been previously used for tillage for husbandry. Animals required more space than crops and fewer people were needed to tend the pastures, leading to the dislodgment of peasants who had depended on the land for their employment (Wrightson 133). While enclosures were initially regarded as neglectful and detrimental to the social order, the practice actually made the land more productive by revitalizing the soil with natural fertilizers. These legitimate benefits and the emergence of capitalistic values of profit over morality allowed the practice to continue through the seventeenth century (Siemon 23-24), though the enclosing landlord remained a literary villain trope throughout the period. The peasants displaced by profiteering landlords were forced to wander the countryside with their only options, as Thomas More puts it in *Utopia*, to rob or beg (Carroll 34).

Current criticism of *Arden of Faversham* portrays Arden as a villainous landlord with no concern for the well being of the tenants he inherited along with the land. Garrett Sullivan argues

in his essay, “Surveying, Land, and Arden of Faversham” that the image of Arden’s body buried on the land he greedily hoarded shows criticism of the new class of landowners, and that his death is justly deserved for the abandonment of feudal, religious, and familial obligations to his tenant, Reede (232). However, this interpretation ignores Arden’s meek characterization and the overtly comedic nature of Greene’s, Black Will’s and Shakebag’s murderous plotting.

Furthermore, the idealization of feudal economies is unrealistic and ignores the polarization of the classes that existed during the mid-Tudor period and led to widespread unrest and rebellion of the English peasantry (Beier). Mihoko Suzuki does a better job with analyzing the uncertain attitudes toward social mobility in her essay, “Gender, Class, and the Social Order in Late Elizabethan Drama.” She argues that patriarchal anxiety about changing class and gender roles is shown in *Arden of Faversham* through the displacement of class conflict onto gender conflict.

The comparative manageability of changes in gender roles to those in class demonstrates just how uncertain society was about shifts in class during this period, suggesting a stronger sense of class hierarchy than gender hierarchy (42-43). Suzuki’s argument regarding class anxieties focuses primarily on the dysfunction of the Ardens’ marriage as a mirror of dysfunction in society, but she does not analyze the various representations of conflict in the play. While Sullivan and Suzuki both make cases for reading *Arden of Faversham* as an anti-landlord play, I will take the argument a step further and add that the play opposes the capitalist economy altogether, as is shown by Arden’s failure to fulfill the stereotype of the greedy landlord and each of the conspirators’ failed attempts at social, economic, or personal advancement.

Arden does not fit the stereotypical model of villainous landlords in literature at the time. In his essay, “‘The Nursery of Beggary’: Enclosure, Vagrancy, and Sedition in the Tudor-Stuart Period”, William Carroll states that, “the painful economic realities of depopulating enclosure

eventually produced two stereotypical dramatic figures of oppression” the “grand encloser of the commons”, who does so for economic gain or personal pleasure, and the “greedy farmer” (37). Arden is represented negatively as a landlord, particularly in his treatment of his former tenant Reede, but it is never specified how or for what purpose Arden is buying the land. Reede curses Arden after Arden refuses to allow Reede or his family to remain living on his land, saying, “That plot of ground which thou detains from me/ I speak it in an agony of spirit -/ Be ruinous and fatal unto thee!” (13.32-34). The ultimate fulfillment of the curse does suggest that Arden’s death was divine retribution. However, though Arden fails in his moral obligations to his tenant, he fulfills his legal obligations. In the scene where Reede curses Arden for the dislodgement of his family, Arden replies to Reede’s confrontation, saying, “That which he craves I dearly bought of him/ Although the rent of it was ever mine” (13.20-21). The Duke of Somerset granted Arden the abbey of Faversham, including the existing copyhold tenant agreements, and it can be assumed from this line that Arden bought the land that Reede had copyhold ownership of and is in the process of converting the land either into leaseholds or enclosures. While this method of removing tenants was not ethical, it was both common and legal. In the play’s epilogue, Franklin, who had been Arden’s friend and advisor, blames his death on his greed and cruelty towards Reede. He says, “Arden lay murdered in that plot of ground / Which he by force and violence held from Reede” (10-11). It’s ironic that this declaration comes from Franklin, who was the first to speak after the curse, accusing Reede of being envious and later agreeing with Arden that he did Reede no harm. Additionally, it was Franklin who initially informed Arden that he was receiving the Abbey lands and who advised Arden to go to London, neglecting his wife while she plotted his murder. Despite the fulfillment of Reede’s curse and Franklin’s condemnation of Arden in the epilogue, it is hard to see Arden as a figure of oppression when he

is cuckolded by his wife and murdered by his household. The fulfillment of Reede's curse suggests a social yearning or nostalgia for the fading moral economy and criticism of capitalist economic practices. However, the epilogue's attempt at vilifying Arden is so out of touch with the tone of the rest of the play that it comes across as an afterthought of the main murder plot. Furthermore, the interpretation of Arden's demise as a punishment for his cruelty as a greedy landlord ignores the greed and cruelty of almost every other major character in the play.

Of all the conspirators in Arden's murder, Mosby has the most to gain if they succeed. In the first dialogue of the play, Arden describes Mosby's previous social advancement as underhanded. Arden says Mosby "Who, by base brokage getting some small stock/ crept into the service of a nobleman,/ And by his servile flattery and fawning/ Is now become the steward of his house" (1.26-29). The claim that he is a duplicitous character is supported by Mosby's affair with Alice and his agreement to plot Arden's murder. However, Mosby seems to regret his elevation when he realizes it has set him on a dangerous path, saying, "My golden time was when I had no gold./ Though then I wanted, yet I slept secure" (8.11-12) and "But since I climbed the top bough of the tree/ And sought to build my nest among the clouds/ Each gentlest airy gale doth shake my bed" (8.15-17). Despite his hesitation, he still plans to go through with the plot to murder Arden, but resolves to get rid of the other murderers so the same will not happen to him. Through his interactions with Alice, it is evident that he sees his marriage to her not as a necessity of their passionate love, as she seems to, but another step up on the social ladder that he must continue to climb. Mosby is weary of the other conspirators, especially Alice. He says in his monologue: "You have supplanted Arden for my sake,/ And will extirpen me to plant another./ Tis fearful sleeping in a serpent's bed,/ And I will cleanly rid my hands of her." (8.40-43). Despite his apprehension, Mosby at no point walks away from the murder plot. His

following interaction with Alice reveals that he overlooked other opportunities for social advancement to pursue her, and that he believes himself to have come too far to give up. Mosby's willingness to plan and commit murder, both for Arden and for Alice and the other conspirators, is driven by the opportunities for advancement the new socioeconomic environment provides. However, his inability to divert from this unwanted path and his death sentence in the play's conclusion shows the perils of social mobility and the dark ambitions it breeds.

While Mosby is driven by opportunities for advancement, Greene is driven by his need to restore his livelihood and his desire for revenge. When Greene comes to confront Arden about his claim to the land, he meets Alice instead. He complains, "Of all the lands of the Abbey of Faversham,/ Generally intitled, so that all former grants/ Are cut off, whereof I myself had one;/ But now my interest by that is void" (1.460-463). When Alice confirms his fear, he says that he will be revenged. To spur him further, Alice accuses her husband of being abusive, heightening Greene's anger and need for justice, so he agrees to help murder Arden as an act of heroism as well as revenge. He says to her that he "Shall set you free from all this discontent./ And if the churl deny my interest,/ And will not yield my lease into my hand,/ I'll pay him home, whatever hap to me" (1.512-515). Greene claims that he means to confront Arden about his land before he kills him, he never does. Although Arden has only just learned of his acquisition of the Abbey lands earlier in the scene, Greene is eager to agree to murder him. While underlying tension between the two is suggested by his vehemence, there is neither a direct confrontation between them or any specific mention of a past wrong. The implication of this is that Greene values revenge against Arden for his advancement at Greene's expense more than he values the land itself. His need for revenge is driven by social mobility and his desire to return to the status quo of the previous economic system. Though he achieves his goal of revenge, the status quo is not

returned; Greene's death sentence prevents him from reaping the material reward for his involvement.

Michael agrees to take part in the murder because he is in love with Mosby's sister, Susan, and is promised her hand in marriage in exchange for his help. Michael's lack of morals in his desperation for Susan's love is shown when he says that he will murder his older brother in order to inherit his family's farm. He says, "I'll make her more worth than twenty painters can,/ For I will rid mine elder brother away,/ And then the farm of Bolton is mine own" (1.171-173). Susan's indifference towards both Michael and the painter Clarke, another suitor, highlights the covetous and brutal nature of Michael's desire for her. Despite his proclaimed willingness to murder his own brother, he is conflicted throughout the play between his service to his master and his love for Susan. When he is supposed to lure Arden so that Black Will and Shakebag can kill him, he says,

My master's kindness pleads to me for life
With just demand, and I must grant it him;
My mistress hath forced me with an oath,
For Susan's sake the which I may not break,
For that is nearer than a master's love. (4.62-66)

Although Michael feels love and duty for Arden, his desire for Susan leads him to agree to help in Arden's murder. Although Michael spares Arden in this scene and makes an excuse for his actions later, he continues to be involved in the murder plot and helps orchestrate Arden's final demise. After the deed is done, the others worry that Michael will betray them, to which he responds, "Why, dost thou think I will betray myself?" (14. 239). Although Michael is the only character who really struggles with the ethical dilemma, ultimately he places his own desires and ambitions above his concern for his master's life. The concern for one's own well being before

duty and morality was a major concern in the shift away from a moral economy to a capitalist one, and Michael's death sentence at the end of the play is punishment for his selfishness.

Black Will and Shakebag, the criminals hired by Mosby to murder Arden, are vagrants who are motivated by money and infamy, but were likely wronged by a landlord or other high-class member of society at some point as well. Despite the historical evidence that the malpractice of landlords was directly related to the increase of vagrancy during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Black Will and Shakebag are ironically the main source of comedic relief in their failed attempts at killing Arden. Their motives for killing Arden are not represented as being as complicated as the other conspirators, and they take pride in their ruthlessness, arguing amongst themselves over who is the better criminal. Black Will and Shakebag also never condemn Arden for his greed as a landlord, as Franklin and Reede each do. In fact, they brag about their own villainy instead. After Black Will responds to Shakebag's taunt about his preparedness, saying that he has stolen more purses than Shakebag has handled pistols in his entire life, Shakebag responds:

Ay, haply thou hast picked more in a throng;
 But should I brag what booties I have took,
 I think the overplus that's more than thine
 Would mount to a greater sum of money
 Than either thou or all thy kin are worth (14.14-18).

It is evident from their banter that they do not grieve at their lowered status. The opposite is true; they have profited from their vagrancy and are proud of it. Their boasting match turns into a fight, which is broken up by Greene. However, despite all their talk, they fail to murder Arden several times. Their bragging and blundering becomes comedic, and fails to criticize the cause of their vagrancy. Though Black Will and Shakebag have the most cause to seek revenge on greedy landlords, their only evident motive is the money and pride in their criminality. This could also

represent the public's generally negative perception of vagrants, as Carroll suggests, but their comedic excess of villainy dilutes the legitimate objections vagrants in particular had regarding greedy landlords while demonstrating their own greed instead.

The executions of Black Will, Shakebag, Michael, Greene, and Mosby at the end of the play serve as a warning of the dangers associated with capitalism and social mobility. Each of them abandons morals to pursue their own ambitions, perpetuating the same system Arden is accused of promoting. Although Arden is condemned for transgressing his moral obligations to his tenants, his failure to conform to the greedy landlord stereotype of literature from the period shows a wider perspective of how changing social and economic structures affected those at a variety of socioeconomic standpoints. Greed is depicted in several forms throughout *Arden of Faversham*, moving the focus away from the greedy landlord trope and suggesting a larger criticism of emerging capitalism in early modern England.

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