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The Restricted Agency of Women in *Arden of Faversham* and *The Spanish Tragedy*

During the Renaissance, women were considered as only useful for marriage and motherhood. This made it difficult for them to escape the confinements of social expectations. Nonetheless, critics argue that the female characters, Alice Arden in *Arden of Faversham* and Bel-Imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy*, have agency despite the social restrictions placed on them. *Arden of Faversham* features Alice Arden, who has an affair with a man, Mosby; and wants to kill her husband in order to be with him. Alice Arden expresses her agency through sexual and social manipulation; however, this agency is limited because she must depend on several men to go through with her murderous plans. Similarly, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Bel-Imperia seeks revenge on her lover, Andrea's, killer, Balthazar. She does this with the help of Horatio, a second lover, who is also killed by Balthazar. Like Alice, Bel-Imperia demonstrates agency by planning the revenge plot and manipulating her environment. Bel-Imperia's agency comes with comparable dilemmas, such as the fear of being forced into a loveless marriage, needing male help in her revenge, and having death as her only option at the end of the drama. In their respective dramas, Alice Arden and Bel-Imperia create agency through crafting opportunities that place them in positions of power, but society's norms restrict their agency and they are punished for transgressing from their traditional roles.

In the Renaissance, women were dependent on men; "a woman was to be defined by her relationship with a man" (Mendelson 66). Even a woman's sexuality was defined by men, with

her being “pure” if she remained a virgin until marriage or with being a spinster if she remained single. Women’s reputations, which were set by men, controlled their sexuality. A woman who was free to follow her desire would be considered a “whore” (Mendelson 65). Women’s lives were surrounded by restrictions, regardless of if they were married or not. A woman’s wedding day symbolized “the woman’s smooth transfer from paternal to spousal authority” (Mendelson 129). This demonstrates that a woman did not control her own person and was always under the authority of someone else. Divorce was rare for women in this period and women were not “permitted to initiate an action for divorce which allowed remarriage” (Mendelson 141). This made it so women became trapped in their marriages without any escape. There was an option for lower-class women, called the “wife sale,” which was a degrading practice in which women were sold in public and bought by their lovers (Mendelson 141). The patriarchal society made it so women were forced into the roles of wives and mothers without much freedom to go outside of those boundaries; “marriage turned a woman into a non-person, her husband’s dependent with no real will of her own” (Mendelson 124). During marriage, a woman’s job only consisted of running the household and bearing children.

I: Alice’s Agency

Criticism about Alice Arden examines her power and explains how she obtains her authority through her manipulation of language and sexuality. Julie Schutzman in “Alice Arden’s Freedom and the Suspended Moment of *Arden of Faversham*” argues that Alice Arden has autonomy but it is limited to the period between when she plans the murder of her husband and her death; “suspended between the idea of Arden’s murder and its inevitable-but much deferred-realization... Alice’s freedom that remains roughly contained between these two points” (290). Being confined between two points limits Alice’s freedom and, outside of these boundaries, she

has zero authority. Schutzman discusses how Alice uses manipulation to gain agency in Faversham; “This geographic space is crucial since it is only from her position within this community that Alice can understand and exploit a societal logic aimed at maintaining the very norms she defies” (294). Alice only has power in Faversham and none outside of her territory. Similarly, Carol Meja LaPerle in “Rhetorical Situationality: Alice Arden’s Kairotic Effect in the Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham” argues that Alice’s “kairos” or her rhetorical manipulation creates situations that allow her to be a female agent. LaPerle argues Alice’s freedom in her sexuality allows her to “challenge the whole social order” (182). Alice’s choice to be with Mosby demonstrates her owning her sexuality, which goes against the monogamy expected by her marriage. Lastly, Catherine Belsey in “Alice Arden’s Crime” states that Alice’s agency creates a “disruption of matrimonial conventions” and that she rejects “institution of marriage” through wanting “a free sexuality, unauthorized within the play as a whole” (133-134). Belsey nonetheless warns that Alice will not escape the social institution of marriage because Mosby will confine her to a “new form of subjection” (147-148). Alice has agency through her manipulation of the situation around her but that agency is limited by the society around her. While Alice can control her husband’s murder, she still relies on a man, Mosby, to do so which does not give her complete freedom; death becomes her only option for completely escaping male authority.

Alice and Mosby’s relationship show her agency between being able to have power over Mosby and to owning her sexuality. While Alice is bound by a male dominant society, she still shows agency through her actions. Alice Arden’s freedom can be seen in her sexuality. She purposely has an affair with Mosby and her husband and the whole town are aware of it; “Love letters passed ‘twixt Mosby and my wife,/ And they have privy meetings in town” (*Arden* 1.15-

16). This demonstrates Alice's control of her sexuality which women were usually not allowed to have. Alice takes her chooses who she will love; "Sweet Mosby is the man that hath my heart/...Love is god, and marriage is but words,/And therefore Mosby's title is the best" (*Arden* 1.98-102). Traditionally, a woman in the Renaissance would not be able to have an affair without it ruining her reputation. In her sexuality, the audience can see that Alice becomes dominant especially when she argues with Mosby; "Being descended of a noble house,/And matched already with a gentleman/ Whose servant thou mayst be? And so farewell" (*Arden* 1.203-205). Alice puts Mosby in his place by reminding him that Arden, her husband, is of much higher class when compared to Mosby which in turn makes her of a higher class to and that she is lowering herself for Mosby. Alice reminding Mosby of her higher position gives her power and control over him in this argument. Alice's relationship with Mosby reveals her agency through openly being a married woman having an affair.

Even though the town knows about this affair, Alice continues to manipulate the people around her to create sympathy for herself. Alice's agency comes through her speech because, without this power, her plan to kill her husband would have never succeeded. Alice lies to Richard Greene, a former tenant with a grudge against Arden, and says that Arden is abusing her to obtain sympathy from him; "Now trust me, Mistress Alice, it grieveth me/ So fair a creature should be so abused" (*Arden of Faversham* 1.507-508). Through Alice's manipulation, she turns Greene against Arden. This creates power for her in order to proceed with her plan to kill him. Also, Alice uses her manipulation to even get Michael, Arden's servant, to work for her. She uses her agency in this case to turn Arden's own men against him. She demonstrates her power by exchanging Susan's, Mosby's sister and Alice's maid, hand in marriage to Michael in order for Michael to follow her:

Ay, but Michael, see you keep your oath,

I'll see he shall not live above a week.

On that condition, Michael, here is my hand

None shall have Mosby's sister but thyself. (*Arden* 1.145-149).

Alice exerts her power to control Michael by manipulating him through his wants, but also this quote shows that Alice has agency through her class status because Susan and Michael are beneath her. This shows Alice's agency by being able to control other people's lives and not just her own.

Alice's manipulation even controls her husband by raising self-doubt in Arden. Arden knows that Alice and Mosby are having an affair and senses that someone, probably Alice, is out to kill him. Alice's first attempt at Arden's murder is by poisoning his breakfast; "I am not well. There's something in this broth/That is not wholesome. Didst thou make it, Alice?" (*Arden* 1.366-367). Alice through the use of manipulation with her outrage at the accusation by saying "there's nothing that I can do to please your taste/You were best to say I would have poisoned you" to make Arden see how ridiculous his thoughts are even if they are true (*Arden* 1.369-371). She is able to make Arden say "I mistrust not thee" to have him erase all thought of accusation (*Arden* 1.391). This demonstrates her control over the people around her to make situations have an outcome that will benefit her in the long run.

Alice's shows agency by coming up with the final plan to kill her husband; "As surely shall he die/As I abhor him and love only thee" (*Arden* 1.140-141). Alice makes decisions without guidance from a male authority. This idea to kill her husband forms into real action which also shows her agency. Alice becomes proactive through creating opportunities for her husband to be killed. She sets up the dinner scene where Arden finally dies; "But, Michael, hark

to me a word or two:/ When my husband is come in, lock the street door./He shall be murdered or the guests come in” (*Arden* 14.167-169). This shows how she takes her agency and applies it to solve her own problems instead of waiting for someone else to take control of the issue.

Alice’s final form of agency comes from her committing the final wound to Arden that kills him; “Nay then give me the weapon/ [*Striking*] Take this for hind’ring Mosby’s and mine./... [*Arden dies*]” (*Arden* 14.238-240). This ultimate act demonstrates Alice taking control and having the power to murder her own husband.

While Alice shows agency through her actions and speech, there are times where her agency is limited by the male dominant society that she lives in. Alice’s plan to kill her husband would not have been successful if she did not enlist Greene for help; “An if he live a day he lives too long./ But frolic, woman! I shall be the man/ Shall set you free from all this discontent” (*Arden* 1.511-513). Alice’s limited agency means that she is unable to do this without Greene. Also, Alice is limited in that she cannot remarry even if she did divorce Arden. Even if she managed to obtain a divorce, she would not have as much wealth since it was Arden’s wealth, not her own wealth. She has no control in the rules that are made by society in that her only option to be with Mosby is to kill Arden.. Finally, As Schutzman states, the geographical setting limits Alice and she would not have power if she went outside the bounds of Faversham. This demonstrates how limited her power is since her plan would never have been successful outside this setting. In Faversham she already has some power due to her marriage with Arden. Lastly, Alice’s death shows the end of her agency; “Bear Mistress Arden unto Canterbury/ Where her sentence is she must be burnt” (*Arden* 17.30-31). 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.

II: Bel-Imperia's Agency

Bel-Imperia is seen as an object by other characters in *The Spanish Tragedy*, but exhibits agency by rejecting the male authorities in the play, including her father, her brother, Lorenzo, her betrothed, Balthazar, and even her chief ally, Hieronimo. Timothy Rosendale in "Agency and Ethics in *The Spanish Tragedy*" examines the patriarchal order in which Andrea, even in ghost form, has "possession" over Bel-Imperia. Rosendale argues that Bel-Imperia does subvert male authority and has agency through rejecting the "authorial grace and self-destructs in a supreme act of self-determination" (Rosendale). This means that when Bel-Imperia refuses to follow Hieronimo's script and kills herself, she finally takes control of her own body. James Shapiro in "Tragedies naturally performed': Kyd's Representation of Violence" agrees with Timothy Rosendale about Bel-Imperia as "a site of female resistance to patriarchal constraints" (Shapiro 108). Shapiro argues that Bel-Imperia's resistance comes from the play which "becomes the symbol of a dying woman's refusal to conform to cultural norms" (Shapiro 109). Like Rosendale, Shapiro states that Bel-Imperia's suicide empowers her since she is "able" to revenge the wrong done to her" (Shapiro 109). Bel-Imperia takes control of her revenge plot and kills Balthazar herself, which shows the ultimate use of agency. While Bel-Imperia demonstrates agency in taking control of her actions and rejecting Hieronimo's play, she still does not completely subvert male authority because she is treated as an object throughout the drama, especially when her father forces an arranged marriage upon her which would have continued if she lived. Like Alice Arden, Bel-Imperia's only escape from the male authority is death.

Bel-Imperia uses her agency in ways that Alice did. She uses language to manipulate her way out of Balthazar's flirtation;

B. No, madam, but in pleasing servitude

Your prison then belike is your conceit

BI. Ay, but conceit my freedom is enthralled. (Kyd 1.4.81-83)

This demonstrates that Bel-Imperia uses language in a way to be able to insult Balthazar without his even noticing. She manipulates the situation by showing how over-exaggerated Balthazar's flirtation is when talking to her. When Bel-Imperia is forced into an arranged marriage with Balthazar set up by her father, she shows agency in rejecting this proposal and refusing to marry Balthazar; "If she neglect him and forgo his love/She both will wrong her own estate and ours" (Kyd 2.4.45-46). Bel-Imperia shows this rejection of her father's will through loving Andrea in the beginning and Horatio even though her father disapproves of Bel-Imperia and Horatio together; "But, honey-sweet and honorable love,/Return we now into your father's sight;/ Dangerous suspicion waits on our delight" (Kyd 2.2.53-55). Also, Bel-Imperia defies a political marriage to be in love with Horatio which shows agency by taking control of the decision making process. This shows Bel-Imperia's agency because she controls her own love life and chooses who she wants to be with even if it goes against the traditional values of society of following her father's orders.

Also, Bel-Imperia manipulates Hieronimo to enlist his help in the revenge plot by playing off his emotions of his son's death to get him to help by writing the letter. The letter was planted to Hieronimo that explained who killed his son; "A letter written to Hieronimo.../ Hieronimo revenge Horatio's death,/ And better fare than Bel-Imperia doth" (Kyd 3.2.25-31). This demonstrates that Bel-Imperia understands how to use people's emotions to get them to do her bidding. Bel-Imperia's agency comes from her use of being able to manipulate other people's words or emotions against them. By gaining Hieronimo's assistance she is able to gain agency to create an opportunity to enact her revenge.

Bel-Imperia shows her agency through starting and finishing her revenge plot. Bel-Imperia takes full control over the death of her love and turns that into revenge; “Yes, second love shall further my revenge.../And where Don Balthazar, that slew my love,/Himself now pleads for favor at my hands” (Kyd 1.4.66-70). Through the diction of “my hands” shows Bel-Imperia’s owning her agency and taking matters into her own hands to make the decision to kill Balthazar. By killing Balthazar, Bel-Imperia takes real action by physically stabbing Balthazar herself, which her goal throughout the play was to enact revenge on Balthazar; “(*Stabs him*)” (Kyd 4.4.67). This demonstrates that Bel-Imperia has control through her revenge plot since she has completed what she set out to do by killing Balthazar. These actions allow Bel-Imperia to have control over her revenge plot and she has the ultimate control over Balthazar by taking his life by her own hands.

Like Alice, society limits Bel-Imperia’s agency since society forces women into traditional roles that do not let them have much control over their own lives. First, Bel-Imperia has to get Hieronimo’s assistance to accomplish her revenge plot. Without Hieronimo setting up the scheme of the play-within-the-play, Bel-Imperia would have never had the opportunity to kill Balthazar. Hieronimo stated himself that the plot was his idea and gave Bel-Imperia the opportunity to stab Balthazar; “Let me entreat you grace my practices,/Forwhy the plot’s already in mine head” (Kyd 4.1.49-51). Also, Hieronimo is able to get Balthazar and Lorenzo involved in the play to present to the King, which Bel-Imperia would not have been able to accomplish on her own. Finally, Bel-Imperia’s only escape from being forced into another arranged marriage by her father for political reasons is to kill herself; “(*Stab herself*)” (Kyd 4.4.67). While Bel-Imperia does decide to end her life and has control over that, it shows that for a woman in this

position there is no better option than death. Death allows Bel-Imperia to escape the oppressive role that was forced upon her.

Alice Arden and Bel-Imperia show agency in a time where women were oppressed due to living in a patriarchal society. Alice and Bel-Imperia demonstrate agency through their use of manipulation in plotting the deaths of the men they hate. Alice has an affair with Mosby, manipulates the people around her and kills her husband which shows her agency in her situation. Bel-Imperia uses manipulation to reject Balthazar, rejects her father's marriage proposal for her and starts and ends her revenge plot by killing Balthazar. Alice and Bel-Imperia take control of their own lives and make decisions that go against society's traditional roles for women. But society limits their agency Both these women are forced to enlist Greene and Hieronimo's help respectively, to have their plans be successful and are met with death themselves due to their actions. Alice and Bel-Imperia have agency but cannot escape the confines that society has forced upon women.

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