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The Renaissance Women's Guide to Divorce: Exploring Marriage in

Arden of Faversham and *The Tragedy of Mariam*

The domestic tragedies, *Arden of Faversham* (1592) and *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613), focus on women who seek to escape unhappy marriages by plotting to kill their husbands. In the anonymous *Arden of Faversham*, which is based on a domestic crime committed in Kent in 1551, Alice Arden colludes with her lover, Mosby, to murder her husband and is burned at the stake for her crimes. In *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Elizabeth Cary, portrays the exploits of Salome, the sister of the Biblical King Herod who, like Alice, desires to escape marriage and be with her lover. While Alice is sentenced to death for killing her spouse, Salome ensures the murder of her husband with no repercussions. Although Alice and Salome attempt to defy patriarchal norms by escaping their marriages, Alice fails to do so due to her indiscretion and limited access to power while the opposite conditions allow Salome to survive.

STEP ONE: KNOW YOUR SOCIAL AND LEGAL RIGHTS

Early modern marriage served as a social and religious means to control women's chastity and "to bring forth fruit and avoid fornication" ("An Homily of the State Matrimony" 285). This control extended to women's legal abilities which entailed that "wives were not permitted to initiate an action for divorce which allowed remarriage" (Mendelson and Crawford 141). Male figureheads were expected to maintain a patriarchal order within the domestic spheres to prevent women from committing such crimes as adultery. Written in 1563, "An Homily of the State of

Matrimony," states that male dominance was necessary, "for the woman is a weak creature, not endowed with like strength and constancy of mind " (286). Francis Dolan conveys that a widespread social anxiety, which placed doubt in men's ability to control their wives, emerged during this era (36). This led to jokes about cuckoldry and plots of murderous wives to become a common trope within Renaissance literature. Yet, these anxieties extended beyond entertainment and influenced English law. Dolan states that after 1352, a woman who killed her husband was not tried for murder, as a man would have been who killed his wife, but instead for petty treason (21). Because marriage was grounded in political and religious principles, a murderous wife was viewed as a disruption to England's social and political order, and was tried as if her crime was directly in opposition to the king. Amy Lois Erickson conveys that "Gentlewomen and those who were relatively well-off appear to have been reasonably familiar with legal texts, and particularly with the laws relating to marriage which affected them most directly" (Erickson 21). However, even if women were able to manipulate the patrilineal laws of marriage, Mendelson and Crawford explain that public shaming rituals enforced the value of women's chastity and ridiculed husbands' cuckoldry (47). Therefore, England's society reflected the patriarchal attitudes of the law which emphasized women's subordination to men.

STEP TWO: DON'T MAKE ALICE'S MISTAKES

Literary criticism on *Arden of Faversham* propose that Alice breaks certain social structures beyond that of the domestic sphere. According to Catherine Belsey, "The assassination of [Alice's husband] Arden is never justified, but it is variously identified as a part of God's providential plan, as a tragedy, as the effect of social and economic change, or as an act of unauthorized heroism, a noble transgression of absolute law" (147). Belsey summarizes various interpretations of Arden's murder, some of which indicate that Alice's noncompliance to the early

modern structure of marriage stretches beyond that of domestic disobedience and amounts to social rebellion. Julie R. Schutzman conveys similar attitudes to Belsey by claiming that "Alice understand[s] and capitalize[s] upon her society's belief in a close relationship between household order and a larger community good" (309). Schutzman argues that Alice is conscious of her defiance towards society and that her role is in fact, the "unauthorized heroine" figure who challenges patrilineal laws.

As a member of the landed gentry, Alice appears to be cognizant of the laws which restrain her as she questions gender-related inequalities by stating, "Why should he thrust his sickle in our corn?/ Or what hath he to do with thee, my love/ Or govern me that am to rule myself?" (*Arden* 10.85-87). Alice openly inquires why she is unable to fulfill her own desires and why Arden governs her. It is clear that the ultimate constraint which prevents Alice from being with Mosby lies in her inability to legally divorce her husband. Alice expresses her understanding of the legal constraints of marriage by stating, "That I am tied to him by marriage/Love is a god, and marriage is but words" (*Arden* 1.99-101). This sentiment however, directly defies marriage as defined in "An Homily of the State of Matrimony" which religiously connects matrimony to be "instituted of God to the intent that man and woman should live lawfully...for God hath straightly forbidden all whoredom" (285). Alice directly defies these societal norms and is forced to gain her own agency outside of the legal system by killing her husband.

Within the domestic tragedy, it becomes clear that Alice and Mosby's relationship is far from a private affair. While Arden exposes their intimacy through love letters, a ring on Mosby's finger, and their "privy meetings in the town," (*Arden* 1.135) it appears as though Alice and Mosby's trysts are fairly public. Alice even expresses, "Because my husband is so jealous;/ And

these my narrow-prying neighbors blab,/ Hinder our meetings when we would confer" (*Arden* 1.132-135). It is evident then that Alice is aware of the public's surveillance regarding her adultery and attempts to "evade blame by making her murderous desire more palatable and comprehensible to her community" (Schutzman 301). By attempting to control the gossip, Alice dispels her own rumors to paint Arden as an unfaithful and violent husband as she states:

Ah, Master Greene, be it spoken in secret here,

I never live good day with him alone.

When he is at home, then have I froward looks,

Hard words and blows to mend the match withal

And, though I might content as a good man

Yet doth he keep in every corner trulls...

Thus live I daily in continual fear" (*Arden* 1.493-500)

While the audience is given little background as to Arden's true treatment of Alice, Alice's rhetoric resembles gossip in which the term "secret" is loosely used. Furthermore, directly following Alice's speech, she employs Greene to assist her in the murder of Arden. Alice's "confession" then appears to be a strategic ploy used to paint herself as the innocent victim and gain Greene's sympathy.

Although Alice speaks publicly in an attempt to manipulate her society's perceptions, she proves to be careless in the number of individuals she employs to assist in Arden's murder. Interestingly, the word "secret" continues to lose its meaning throughout the play as Alice proceeds to enlist more accomplices. Alice first recruits her husband's servant and exclaims "Ay, but Michael, see you keep your oath,/ And be as secret as you are resolute " (*Arden* 1.145-46). Nevertheless, Alice soon confides in not only Mosby but Greene as well, who then further enlists

both Black Will and Shakebag. Greene employs these two men by stating, "Wherein if you'll be secret and profound,/ I'll give you twenty angels for your pains" (*Arden* 2.84-88). Again, this notion of a "secret" diminishes in meaning and continues to lose its significance as Alice employs Clarke, the painter, and lastly Susan who "[will] be as secret as ourselves" (*Arden* 14.165). While Alice may use the public's surveillance and employment of many characters to ensure the murder of Arden, it is this same tendency to speak publicly that seems to determine her fate. Francis Dolan notes that while a patriarchal society may "recognize limits to a husband's power over his wife, [they] yet present a wife's violent resistance as ultimately unjustifiable and destructive of the political order" (Dolan 37). Alice seems to falsely believe that society would momentarily overlook the patriarchal values of women's submission and accept her infidelity and murderous desires if she played the victim of an unhappy marriage.

Alice not only misjudges her community, but entrusts the murder of Arden to a handful of unreliable accomplices. After the confidants' numerous failed attempts to murder Arden, Alice resorts to stabbing her husband herself. Regrettably, Alice soon discovers that her direct hand in Arden's death leads to overwhelming feelings of both fear and guilt. Alice reveals to Mosby that she cannot keep Arden's murder to herself as she conveys, "Ah, but I cannot. Was he not slain by me?/ My husband's death torments me at the heart" (*Arden* 14.269-270). Alice's additional paranoia stems from her inability to wash Arden's blood out of the floor which makes her a spectacle to those who remain unaware of the murder:

FRANKLIN. What ails you, woman, to cry so suddenly?

ALICE. Ah, neighbors, a sudden qualm came over my heart.

My husband's being forth torments my mind

I know something's amiss; he is not well,

Or else I should have heard of him ere now. (*Arden* 14.302-306)

In an attempt to prevent the public from suspecting her guilt, Alice once more attempts to cast the public gaze onto Arden as she asks the town to go search for him. However, this gaze is quickly cast back upon Alice as Michael states, "Oh, mistress, the Mayor and all the watch/ Are coming towards our house with glaives and bills!" (*Arden* 14.341-342). In addition to the public's involvement in her affair and murder plot, Alice's direct responsibility for Arden's death further contributes to her downfall as her guilt becomes evident to her patriarchal community. Because Alice has limited access to legal power, which would allow her to lawfully escape marriage, she is unable to remove herself from Arden's death. Furthermore, Alice's indiscretion in communicating her unlawful desires of infidelity and murder ultimately prevent Alice from evading punishment for her crimes.

STEP THREE: FOLLOW THE SUCCESSES OF SALOME

While *Arden of Faversham* takes place within early modern England and adheres to its patriarchal rule, *The Tragedy of Mariam* appears to be set in biblical Judea. Cristina León Alfar juxtaposes Mosaic, or Jewish law, to that of Renaissance England. Alfar reveals that both forms of law mandate a patrilineal system in which women are governed by their husbands. Alfar claims that Salome serves to "expose the callous and one-sided nature of the law" (63) which reflects Shutzman's reading of Alice as a social revolutionary. While Margaret Ferguson deems Salome as the "morality Vice figure," she still acknowledges that Salome's character speaks "eloquently against the injustice of Jewish law" (237). These critics then suggest that Salome's desire to escape her marriage questions her unequal standing in a patriarchal society.

Throughout the tragedy, Salome expresses a conscious understanding of her confinement within marriage. Her knowledge of law becomes evident as she states, a "separating bill might

free his fate/ From such a yoke that did so much displeasure./ Why should such privilege to man be given?" (1.4.43-5). Salome, like Alice, questions the inequalities of women and further expresses "I'll be the custom breaker, and begin/ To show my sex the way to freedom's door" (1.4.50-1) suggesting that she will work around the constraints of law. While Salome and Alice seem to equally defy the social and legal parameters of their sex, Salome still lives to reap the benefits of killing her husband, Constabarus, because of her quiet manipulation of the patriarchal order.

In *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Salome is surrounded by a society that reflects the values of marriage which demand female subordination. Throughout the play, the chorus that "offers a perspective on wifely duty"(Ferguson 244), conveys the dangers of women's unbridled speech and further warns of society's perceptions by stating:

To hear a tale with ears prejudicate,
 It spoils the judgement and corrupts the sense.
 That human error, given to every state,
 Is greater enemy to innocence. (2 Chorus. 1-5)

While Salome is susceptible to the public gaze because of her royal status, she does not attempt to control or manipulate the community's perception as Alice does. Instead, Salome remains silent and chaste in the eyes of the public. By limiting the knowledge of her affair to her lover, Silleus, and her husband, Constabarus, Salome is able to privately conceal both her infidelity and her potential motive for killing her husband. In fact, Salome never discloses her intention to kill Constabarus to anyone but the audience. Instead, Salome conveys that she merely desires a divorce from Constabarus under the guise that she rejects Constabarus's disloyalty to the king. Salome betrays her husband to her second brother Pheroras through a bargain. Salome promises

to convince the King that Pheroras's lover, Graphina, is well-suited for him as long as Pheroras tells the king of Constabarus's crime. Salome states,

But tell the King that Constabarus hid
 The sons of Babas, done to death before;
 And 'tis no more than Constabarus did.
 And tell him more, that we, for Herod's sake,
 Not able to endure our brother's foe,
 Did with a bill our separation make,
 though loath from Constabarus else to go. (3.2.47-4)

Thus, Salome detaches herself from her speech by focusing on Constabarus's crime and her allegiance to the king, rather than her own personal motives for rejecting Constabarus. Through Herod's power Salome is able to secretly manipulate the law which allows her to escape her marriage without public suspicion.

Although Salome conveys to both Pheroras and Herod that she desires to divorce Constabarus, it is evident that Salome's true aspiration is to murder her spouse. Towards the beginning of the play, when Herod is rumored to be dead, Salome conveys, "If Herod had lived, I might to him accuse [Constabarus]/...But now I must divorce him from my bed/ That my Silleus may possess his room" (1.4.53-8). Salome seems to suggest that without Herod's power to either divorce or convict Constabarus she would resort to murdering him herself. Although, when Herod proves to be alive, Salome is able to use Herod's power to "appropriate... existing laws for her own purposes to seek equity outside the law" (Albet 66). Even after Herod hears of Constabarus's crimes and Salome's desire to divorce him, Herod proclaims, "Now, Salome will whine to beg his breath,/ But I'll be deaf to prayers and blind to tears" (4.2.35-6). Because Herod

believes Salome will be distressed at the news of her husband's execution, it is apparent that even Herod is unaware of Salome's ultimate desire and plot to have Constabarus killed. Salome appears to be fully aware that Herod's absolute rule is driven by his anxieties of treason and that he will ensure Constabarus's execution just as she anticipates. As Herod deliberates Mariam's fate Salome states, "I'll leave you to your passion. 'Tis no time/To purge me now, though of a guiltless crime" (4.7.161-62). Salome's indifference of her role in Mariam's downfall suggests that her attitude of Constabarus's death is similarly guiltless. Because Salome is able to avoid killing Constabarus directly, she is able to not only escape public suspicion of contributing to his murder, but does not suffer any guilt because of her physical removal from Constabarus's death.

CONCLUSION

Through an examination of *Arden of Faversham* and *The Tragedy of Mariam*, it is evident that these plays do not take place within a social utopia, but are indeed set in a society that mirrors the patriarchal values of Renaissance England. Within both plays, Alice and Salome are constrained by laws that do not permit divorce and infidelity; though, what governs the fate of both women is the public's perception of their adherence of the patriarchal order. In *Arden of Faversham*, Alice is unable to escape death for her husband's murder because her relationship with Mosby is an open affair that warranted the public's involvement and surveillance. As a result of Alice's direct hand in Arden's murder, she suffers guilt which further contributes to her downfall as she again becomes a public spectacle and finally confesses to her crime. In *The Tragedy of Mariam* however, Salome keeps her love affair private and removes herself from the murder of Constabarus through the manipulation of King Herod's legal power. Because Alice is unable to suppress the patriarchal order of her society, the public ultimately upholds their values by forcing Alice to suffer for her crimes. In contrast, Salome's discretion allows her to avoid

public suspicion, thus she is not held accountable for her actions even within a patriarchal society.

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