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A PRIVATE MATTER:

ARDEN OF FAVERSHAM AND THE EARLY MODERN HISTORY PLAY

by

Jessica Y. Hoffman

A Thesis
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**Dedicated**

to the memory of my grandmother,

Carol King,

who took me to my first Shakespeare play,

encouraged my bookish propensities,

and made me an avid lover of literature and theater.
Abstract

In the last fifty years, changes in the study of history have necessitated a questioning of the way we think about historiography and all genres of literature connected to our understanding of history. While the early modern history play genre has not been immune to shifts toward a focus on “social history” (defined as the history of the general population rather than the history of rulers), examining the history play genre in terms of plays that have been excluded from the genre canon shows that there is still a bias toward monarchical history when we study historiography. The anonymous *Arden of Faversham* (c. 1592), about a gentleman who is murdered by his own wife and a servant with whom she is having an affair, is not generally considered a history play despite its engagement with sixteenth-century social history. Yet, I argue that the socioeconomic circumstances of the lower and middling people of early modern England, portrayed in *Arden of Faversham*, are the same circumstances that gave rise to the first commercial playhouses in sixteenth-century England. Analyzing three plays using a blend of historiography and stage history, and considering the sociopolitical contexts in which Elizabethan plays were written and performed, this paper illuminates the importance of social history in reading early modern history plays. By reading *Arden of Faversham* in relation to two plays traditionally recognized as history plays, *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe (c. 1593) and *Richard III* by William Shakespeare (c. 1593) I show that “domestic” affairs have as much place in “historiography” as matters of state.
The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, (tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral,) scene individable, or poem unlimited¹

This list of genres provided by Polonius in *Hamlet* (almost *ad absurdum*) acknowledges both the common practice by writers of blending or tweaking genres, as well as the common desire for some in the audience to categorize works back into neat genre distinctions. Genre distinction and categorization remains a contentious area of literary criticism. To some minds, who see genre purely as a means of classification, the entire concept of genre can seem shallow or unnecessarily limiting, and some critics have argued for a move away from the very concept of genre.² Other scholars, perhaps most notably Alastair Fowler, have argued for the importance of genre on the grounds that genre theory is necessary as a means of communication and interpretation: more than simply a means of classification.³ Genre is not merely a way for readers to understand what “kind” of literature they are experiencing; genre is directly related to a society’s sensibilities. As conceptions and methods of interpretation shift, so too does genre, necessitating continuous reevaluations of our generic assumptions and distinctions. What is considered “comedy” changes as cultural perceptions of comedy changes; what is considered an “epic” changes with cultural perceptions as well; and as our understanding and scholarship of “history” changes, what we consider “historiography” needs to be reexamined.

The early modern history play has long been defined as a play about historical English royalty and those closest to them. Nearly all traditionally accepted history plays are named for a

monarch and depict that monarch in politically charged historical moments. In addition to *Edward II* and *Richard III*, which I examine at length in my second chapter, notable examples include *Henry V, Richard II, King John*, and both parts of *Henry IV*. These canonical history plays have been given a great deal of attention by scholars focusing on the history play genre. But the genre can be as much defined by the plays that are traditionally excluded from the genre as those that are accepted into it. It is especially pertinent in a reexamination of genre to consider what materials are not accepted into a genre and why they are excluded.

The anonymous play, *Arden of Faversham*, exemplifies what is at stake when classifying early modern drama into generic categories. First performed circa 1592, *Arden of Faversham* has long fascinated scholars of early modern theater as a dramatic work and as a window for insight into the lives of the middling people of the sixteenth century. Yet it is rarely considered a history play, and no one has yet made an extended argument for its inclusion into this genre. Instead, *Arden* has been traditionally classified as a domestic tragedy. It is not incorrect to call *Arden* a domestic tragedy, but because tragedy is usually written about people from elite groups, *Arden of Faversham* is relegated into what has traditionally been considered a “lesser” subgenre of tragedy.4 Considering *Arden of Faversham* a play about “domestic matters” does the play a great disservice and ignores its interaction with the political and social zeitgeist of the 1590s. I aim to prove that early modern scholarship is overdue for a reexamination of the history play genre, and to argue that such a reexamination in light of recent changes in our conceptions of “history”

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4 The difference between tragedies and histories is an elusive one, and both *Edward II* and *Richard III* can be considered both history plays and tragedies. Irving Ribner notes in *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* that the genres are “closely allied” and that “although modern critics often have attempted to distinguish between the history play and tragedy as mutually exclusive dramatic genres, it is impossible to do so” (26). Therefore the long tradition of reading *Arden of Faversham* as a domestic tragedy does not necessarily mean that the play is not also a history play. A play can certainly be both a “tragedy” and a “history”; it is the “domestic” aspect of the “domestic tragedy” genre that can seem antithetical to the history genre. Yet as this paper will prove, there is an important place for domestic matters in history and in historiography.
merits new evaluations of what is included in the canon of history plays. I demonstrate that as our understanding of historiography and history plays shifts and grows, it makes more and more sense to read *Arden of Faversham* as a history play. By revisiting the form and functions of early modern history plays, and by comparing *Arden of Faversham* to two other politically charged history plays written within a year or so of *Arden*, *Richard III* and *Edward II*, it is easy to see that reading *Arden of Faversham* as a history play expands our understanding of history plays as a genre and enhances the literary scholarship on the play itself.

While early modern historiography should not be the only lens through which scholars consider history plays, it almost always needs to be the starting point. Historiography, in general, provides a way of commenting on the present by portraying the past and considering current sociopolitical anxieties. History plays approach historiography in a way that is unique to the stage; but they are a later development in the early modern fascination with history. The most notable works of early modern historiography, written in the mid-sixteenth century, appear in Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. These chronicles, as scholars have noted, “were at once the crowning achievement of Tudor historiography and the principal source for contemporary playwrights and poets.”

As the title suggests, Holinshed and his collaborators sought to lay out a complete history of the England, Scotland, and Ireland; the *Chronicles* therefore encompass a great range of subject matter, but the focus on English history speaks to the Anglocentric attitude toward “history” in early modern England, despite the noted fascination many early modern writers had with classical history.

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In contrast to the broad scope of chroniclers, playwrights and poets who took material from Holinshed’s *Chronicles* for their own purposes selected particular stories from the *Chronicles*. Phyllis Rackin explains in *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* that for humanists, historiography was meant to be didactic and that “Tudor historians focused on historical figures and situations that provided instructive analogues for contemporary persons and predicaments.” Elizabethan playwrights chose chronicle narratives that treated issues of particular interest to them, like monarchical succession or status by birthright, which I will explore in the work of Marlowe and Shakespeare in the next chapter. One eminent scholar of early modern history plays asserts that “historical eras were chosen for dramatization particularly because they offered direct parallels with the events of the dramatists’ own times.” This somewhat oversimplifies the many reasons that historical chronicles were of interest to poets and playwrights in the late sixteenth century. A more recent scholar of Elizabethan theater, Brian Walsh, is more correct but less specific in his analysis of the issue. He argues that “aspects of [history plays] were certainly calculated as direct, topical responses to events of the 1590s” but that “they are almost always impossible to associate definitively with any one agenda.” Most works of Elizabethan drama—especially history plays—defy any singular simplistic political interpretation, even when they seem propagandic. As a specific example of an issue frequently examined in early modern plays, Walsh notes Elizabethan drama’s fixation on problems with succession and says that this fixation “can perhaps be more productively connected to this historical culture of rupture rather than to specifics of partisan Elizabethan politics.”

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10 Walsh, *Shakespeare, the Queen’s Men*, 17.
succession come up in all three plays examined in the following chapters, and it is apparent that the playwrights saw these issues as complex, multifaceted problems with no simple answer.

History plays, like the ones I will analyze, are a unique sub-group of early modern historiography, just as they are a unique genre of early modern drama. The political implications of historiography have been well-established by early modern scholars. But in studying history plays it is crucial to think of the ways that drama, specifically, provides unique opportunities for presenting the past and engaging with history. By virtue of being performed rather than just read, history plays comment on sociopolitical anxieties or ideas in ways which can make them more topical, complex, and evocative than most chronicles. Because of the differences in form between staged history plays and other forms of historiography, it is crucial that history plays are studied as plays (rather than lumping them in with chronicles and other forms of historiography) in a way which considers the specific merits of the dramatic form. In the introduction to his study on early modern history plays in performance, Walsh notes, “Of all the forms of history, performance alone supplies a pretense of sensual contact with the vanished past through the bodies that move and speak on stage.”¹¹ By this merit, history plays were more affective and provocative than most chronicles. Plays allow for the presentation of past events in ways that focus on the individual people involved and put the political implications in the background. This, in turn, blurs the lines between private and public lives and we instead focus on the motivations and impacts of multiple individual “players” of history.

Previous scholarship on history plays and early modern historiography by scholars like Ribner, Rackin, Walsh, and others offers excellent insight into the historiographical aspects of history plays, but neither Ribner nor the scholars who follow in his footsteps give due attention

¹¹ Walsh, Shakespeare, the Queen’s Men, 1.
to the unique nuances which drama offers to historiography. Most of the attempts to define the
history play rest on defining what exactly constitutes “history” and ignore the “play” element of
the “history play.” Some may assume that the “play” component of “history play” needs no
explanation, and indeed it is fairly self-explanatory, yet this has caused some scholars to
completely pass over the concept of the play as they attempt to grapple with the nuances and
intricacies of the history play genre. When attention is given to the stage history of history plays
and the context in which such plays were written, we can see how important it is to blend both
the historiographical elements and the dramatic elements of the history plays.

Irving Ribner attempts to lay out the purposes for which history plays would have been
written. He lists seven potential purposes separated into two different Elizabethan philosophies
of history:

Those stemming from classical and humanist philosophies include: (1) a nationalistic
glorification of England; (2) an analysis of contemporary affairs, both national and
foreign so as to make clear the virtues and the failings of contemporary statesmen; (3) a
use of past events as a guide to political behavior in the present; (4) a use of history as
documentation for political theory; and (5) a study of past political disaster as an aid to
Stoical fortitude in the present. Those stemming from medieval Christian philosophy of
history include: (6) illustration of the providence of God as the ruling force in human —
and primarily political — affairs, and (7) exposition of a rational plan in human events
which must affirm the wisdom and justice of God.12

Thus Ribner concludes, “We may then define history plays as those which use, for any
combination of these purposes, material drawn from national chronicles and assumed by the
dramatist to be true.”13 He also expresses the need to limit his study of history plays “to those
plays which deal with the history of England,”14 and notes that classical history, which was also
a popular source for Elizabethan playwrights, “could never have the same significance as English

14 Ribner, The English History Play, 2.
history to the Elizabethans.”\textsuperscript{15} Ribner’s understanding of the history play and its functions has continued to inform most studies on the genre, but more recent scholars have scrutinized his approach to studying history plays.

If the definition of the history play hinges on the dramatist’s belief in the subject matter, then this definition requires the scholar to know and understand mindset of someone who wrote over four-hundred years ago, sometimes collaboratively, and whose identity has been obscured or lost over hundreds of years. Benjamin Griffin is particularly critical of Ribner’s approach and points out many of its shortcomings, writing that “Ribner’s approach…is insensitive to the differences between a book and a stage-play”\textsuperscript{16} and that Ribner’s definition relies on the flawed premise that it is possible for us to truly know what early modern theatregoers “accepted as factual.”\textsuperscript{17} Ribner’s definition also hinges on the perceived intentions of the playwright; therefore it is also problematic because it is impossible to be certain what was “assumed by the dramatist to be true.” This becomes especially hopeless when looking at plays where the dramatist is unknown, such as Arden of Faversham. This is not to say that Ribner’s study is obsolete; his list of purposes for the writing of history plays is echoed in modern scholarship. Even if we can never know the mind of the playwrights who wrote early modern history plays, we assume that they were written with some purpose or intent in mind, and to say that they were written solely for entertainment would be naive. There is a loose general consensus among prominent scholars about the purposes of history plays, though the nuances continue to be scrutinized and debated. It is usually assumed that history plays deal with historical English monarchs (though it is worth noting that Ribner’s definition never specifies that history plays must deal with Kings or other

\textsuperscript{15} Ribner, \textit{The English History Play}, 5.
\textsuperscript{16} Benjamin Griffin, \textit{Playing the Past: Approaches to English Historical Drama 1385-1600}, (Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 5.
\textsuperscript{17} Griffin, \textit{Playing the Past}, 2.
rulers). We can say with certainty that the history plays of the English Renaissance are plays about English history which, in their own ways, comment on the present state of national affairs. To give a more specific definition than that, however, would be to contend with some prominent early modernist on what makes a history play.

In fact, one of the most agreed-upon ideas in the study of history plays is that providing an exact definition is either problematic or impossible. Even though Ribner strives to define the genre, he admits, “there will always be some plays which defy classification” and says we must accept “that any definition of a literary genre is essentially an abstract ideal, and that no conceivable definition will apply equally well to every play we choose to call a history play.”¹⁸ Benjamin Griffin, as he attempts to explain what exactly constitutes a “history play,” astutely concludes, “If the genre’s essential features are ‘Englishness’ and ‘pastness,’ these, by themselves, are still insufficient to constitute a genre...Still, this rubric ‘drama on specific times in the nation’s past’ will help to organize the field of the drama.”¹⁹

Part of what creates the frustrating ambiguity surrounding the history play genre is the lack of early modern definitions for the genre. Even at the time these history plays were written, “despite the widespread interest in history and the overwhelming chorus of praise for the benefits its study could confer, there was no clear consensus about its nature and purpose.”²⁰ Walsh traces the origin of the history play as a distinct genre back to the First Folio,²¹ which was published after the body of plays we think of as the early modern history plays had been composed and performed. Griffin also notes that, “during the heyday of the plays under investigation, they may seldom have been perceived as a distinct genre. The classification of the histories as plays on

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²⁰ Rackin, *Stages of History*, 5.
²¹ Walsh, *Shakespeare, the Queen's Men*, 19.
English kings seems only to have become standard after about 1605 — after, that is, the decline of the genre.”22 But despite the lack of consensus over the genre, and despite our inability to form a concrete definition for “history plays,” the stakes are high when we call into question what does and does not constitute history or historiography.

As opposed to defining genres like comedy, tragedy, or romance, the definition of history plays is directly tied into defining the concept of history. If we assume that history plays are those that are especially relevant to the sociopolitical history of England, we also assume that those that are excluded from the genre are less relevant to sociopolitical historical issues. While few would argue that plays like The Tempest or Hamlet23 are not relevant to sociopolitical conditions in early modern England, there is still some need for distinction between history plays and other works of drama; it would be equally ill advised, for example, to try to claim that Two Gentlemen of Verona meditates just as much on the trajectory of Elizabethan history and politics as Edward II or Richard III. As Walsh argues, “plays of the period intervene in Elizabethan historical culture, and I find the stakes of that intervention to be higher and the yields of analysis more revealing in plays that cover what would broadly have been accepted as the ‘real’ English past.”24

As impossible as it can be to define exactly what the form, purpose, or intent of early modern history plays might have been, or even what exactly the genre means today, there are certainly accepted elements of the genre. We understand that Elizabethan historiography and history plays are indicative of changes in conceptions of history in the early modern period.

22 Griffin, Playing the Past, 19.
23 Walsh, Shakespeare, the Queen's Men, 19 uses these plays as examples of works which are clearly “centered in some way on contested kingship and crises of succession; that is, on interruptions and threats to continuity at the level of national leadership and the forms of national community centered on particular ruling figures and houses” but which are not history plays.
24 Walsh, Shakespeare, the Queen's Men, 19.
Rackin even asserts, “Shakespeare’s playhouse constituted an arena where cultural change was not simply represented but rehearsed and enacted. It was, in short, a place where history was made.” As Rackin rightly argues, to say that Elizabethan historiography represents changes in the conceptions of history in the early modern period is only a part of the whole story, for in many ways the historiography of the period (especially in the playhouses) had an instrumental role in shaping changes in the early modern conceptions of history. Robert Weimann argues: “To reduce the theater to a mere ‘reflection’ of its environment seems, even as a generalization, unduly limiting” because of the profound effects that theater could have on its society, as well as vice versa. For theater to “reflect” its society would mean that it merely portrayed, in some realistic but superficial way, the sociopolitical milieu in which it was created. But early modern theater did much more than just “portray” its environment. Weimann concludes: “even when [theater] reflected tensions and compromises of sixteenth-century England, was also a potent force that helped to create the specific character and transitional nature of that society.” Similarly, one of Walsh’s main arguments in Shakespeare, The Queen’s Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History is that Elizabethan history plays “changed the conversation on history at the end of the sixteenth century.” He claims that “representing the past with lively bodies leads to a questioning of the very being of the past, for the physical dynamics of theater highlight the elusiveness of history.” Walsh then concludes:

The startling power and enduring quality of Shakespeare’s history plays in particular ensured that the performance of history would not merely expand the range of Elizabethan historical culture but would alter it as well, for these plays propose a

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25 Rackin, Stages of History, ix.
27 Weimann, Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition, xii.
28 Walsh, Shakespeare, the Queen’s Men, 22.
29 Walsh, Shakespeare, the Queen's Men, 22.
continuing if not commonly articulated model of historical consciousness, one that is structured by the dynamics of stage performance.\textsuperscript{30}

Walsh supplies us with a way of thinking about the history genre which allows us to interrogate the genre by its impact on the audience. Unlike Ribner’s take, which relies on the perceived intentions of the author, Walsh’s theory of the history play connects with the playhouse audiences and the impact that the genre had on society at large. Walsh also points out how influential some history plays were shaping the way that people perceived and understood history. Still today, versions of history popularized by Elizabethan playwrights (\textit{Edward II} and \textit{Richard III} being two prime examples) are more well known than historical narratives which adhere more closely to extant records. Walsh’s theory is particularly useful for modern scholarship because allows for an understanding of the history play genre predicated on the way it continues to connect with audiences up to the present day.

Obviously it is necessary to consider the sociopolitical milieu from which these history plays came if we wish to fully understand them; but this is only one way of considering the genre. Regularly reexamining the history play genre in modern contexts means that the genre can remain fluid, and can be reinterpreted as new trends in readership, scholarship, and production of these plays emerge. Phyllis Rackin’s study of the history play is continually self-conscious about its own place in history; she asserts “history is always constructed in retrospect,”\textsuperscript{31} and admits that “writing from our own place in history, we cannot see the plays under the aspect of eternity or even from the perspective of an Elizabethan spectator.”\textsuperscript{32} It can therefore be limiting for modern scholars to focus too much on Elizabethan concepts of “history,” when modern notions of “history” and “historiography” have shifted to focus on “social history.” Keith Wrightson uses

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\textsuperscript{30} Walsh, \textit{Shakespeare, the Queen's Men}, 39. \\
\textsuperscript{31} Rackin, \textit{Stages of History}, 59. \\
\textsuperscript{32} Rackin, \textit{Stages of History}, 39.
\end{flushright}
the term “social history” in his book *English Society 1530-1680*, where he explains: “A ‘new
social history’ has appeared, a history in which deliberate effort has been made to recover the
experience of the mass of English people, to rediscover them as members of a distinct and
vigorous culture and to understand their part in the making of their history.” This has been the
trend among historians since the middle of the twentieth century, according to Wrightson.

Literary scholars, too, have looked more and more at the people in lower social classes and their
contributions to the cultures in which they are instrumental but sometimes invisible; Robert
Weimann has advocated for “a view of history as a total process of social change, struggle, and
control” which looks at the entire population and the contributions of all people. Rather than
limiting ourselves, like Ribner, to an Elizabethan notion of “history” we should instead look at
history plays from the perspective of social history. When we do this, plays like *Arden of
Faversham*, which portray middling folk and their servants, become important historiographical
works. This is even more apparent when we consider scholarship on stage history, which
illuminates the class differences in the creation and reception of theater versus other forms of
literature.

    It is important to remember that the playwrights who wrote for the stage did so with
different attitudes, concerns, and audiences than other writers. Forms of theater were consistently
present throughout the middle ages, but the late sixteenth century saw a brand new
commercialization of theater when playhouses were built for the purposes of theater just outside
London. These playhouses turned theater into a booming commercial endeavor and commodified

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theater in ways England had not experienced previously. The commercial and performative aspects of Elizabethan theater influenced the way that plays were written; these aspects are ignored when scholars look at plays only as written pieces rather than works intended for performance. Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern’s recent book *Shakespeare in Parts* considers the fact that the entire printed format of plays was different from other written works, since plays were produced in “parts” for the actors rather than as a whole play. While the parts of the plays will not factor into my argument, Palfrey and Stern illustrate throughout their book that the conditions of writing for the stage were significantly different from any other form of writing, and that plays must be considered in their own unique format rather than comparing them to other pieces of writing without appropriate caveats.

The playhouses of Elizabethan England are their own cultural and economic phenomenon, one which was kept separate from, but at the same time was inextricably connected to, the mainstream politics and culture of late sixteenth century London. Andrew Gurr’s *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* situates early modern drama not only in its own time period but also specifically in the early modern playhouses—that is, in the market of commercial entertainment—and proves that theater was always informed by economic elements. His assertions that “the players were there to give entertainment and to make money,” and that “for the majority of the poets it was entertainment they were creating, not art, and the poets accordingly wrote for their age, not for all time” can seem a bit reductive in light of more recent scholarship on Elizabethan drama. But Gurr’s work reminds us that the public

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37 For an example of such scholarship we may look again to Brian Walsh, *Shakespeare, the Queen’s Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History*. 
playhouses were a commercial product, and that those who operated the playhouses and created the plays were merchants and entertainers as much as they were artists. The business of the public playhouses meant that actors and playwrights were writing for the masses rather than for an elite few. It would be foolish, especially in the context of history plays, to say that Elizabethan playwrights wrote solely for entertainment; but it is also naive not to consider the fact that the livelihood of the players and playwrights relied on the continued attendance of masses of people at the public playhouses. Early modern plays, history plays or otherwise, were written with the primary intention of making money. Making money at the public playhouses relied on appealing not to a small group of elite consumers, but to large masses who would fill the standing rooms of the public playhouses.\(^{38}\) The public playhouses drew diverse audiences from various social strata. All that was required to see a play at the public playhouse a minimum of one penny and a willingness to venture outside the city of London to the somewhat disreputable outskirts of London where the theaters, brothels, and prisons were.\(^{39}\) One early modern archival source, cited in *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, notes that one performance had in its audience gentlemen, servingmen, lawyers, clerks, knights, and one earl.\(^{40}\) It is therefore no wonder that the notion that history and tragedy “belonged to” the aristocracy would be challenged in these playhouses.

The owners and facilitators of the playhouses were from the middle of England’s social hierarchy, referred to as the “middling sort.” The sixteenth century was a time of flux and of opportunity for the middling folk; monetary opportunities and possibilities for upward social mobility were more plentiful than they had previously been. Shakespeare’s drama did not eclipse

\(^{38}\) Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 214.


\(^{40}\) Quoted in Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 214.
the early modern theater scene the way it sometimes eclipses our early modern scholarship, but he is an exemplary playwright in his ambitions, both social and monetary. These ambitions influenced his work just as they influenced the work of other Elizabethan playwrights. Scholars have commented on his work as both an entertainer and an innovator, claiming “once a trick or trope was learned, it wouldn’t easily be forgotten. At the same time…Shakespeare’s willingness to continue to take risks showed that he would not be sated or calmed by popular success. At every level, micro- and macro-, expressive and technical, Shakespeare continued to experiment.”  

It is perhaps because of the need to entertain that Elizabethan drama can be at once so revolutionary and intellectual, so gory and violent, so dark, and so silly. Much like our modern entertainment industry, the commercial theaters of the 1590s were driven by their consumers. It was necessary to keep people coming back to the playhouses to maintain commercial prosperity.

We know that Shakespeare, perhaps more so than most other playwrights, held ambitions for social advancement because he applied for a coat of arms in 1596, thus raising his status to that of a gentleman. We also know that because of his success as a playwright and his shares in a playing company (the latter probably being more lucrative than the former) Shakespeare died a very wealthy man. Social status in Elizabethan England was not directly related to economic prosperity; one could be very rich without ever achieving a gentleman status. Both money and status were in flux for the middling folk more than the upper or lower echelons of early modern society, and the people who worked for the playhouses at the end of the sixteenth century were in a very lucrative and noteworthy (to some, infamous) profession. Shakespeare not only

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impersonated gentry on stage—something that would have been scandalous to English elites\textsuperscript{44}—but through a combination of his father’s advantageous marriage and his own monetary success, he became a member of the gentry.\textsuperscript{45}

The economic concerns and the social opportunities which defined the Elizabethan middling class would have been felt heavily by the playwrights and the players who worked in the playhouses. Such concerns are apparent, either explicitly or implicitly, in almost every play produced in the early modern period, and they are particularly noteworthy in the history plays. For example, \textit{Edward II} and \textit{Richard III} both concern the consequences of upward social mobility when achieved through unscrupulous ends. In Marlowe’s play, Edward II raises his favorite, Gaveston, well above the rank that he is entitled to. The noblemen in Edward’s court seem much more upset with the raising of Gaveston’s rank, and the use of the crown’s treasury to dote upon Gaveston, than they are upset by Edward’s personal infatuation or attachment to him. From the other perspective, the titular character in \textit{Richard III}, not content with his status as an earl, vies for the throne even though there are others who supersede his claim. Ultimately his claim to the throne relies on subterfuge and murder, yet his villainy becomes justification for the ascension of Henry VII who had, arguably, a weaker claim to the throne than Richard. Even the more traditional history plays, depicting monarchs and aristocracy, show a heightened emphasis on economic and social status.

\textit{Arden of Faversham} is an even more explicit commentary on the upward aspirations of Elizabethan playwrights because Arden is of that same middling class to which playwrights and players belonged. Arden’s status of “gentleman” is similar to that of Shakespeare’s, belonging to the lowest tier of nobility but still being able to claim higher status than common merchants and

\textsuperscript{44} Rackin, \textit{Stages of History}, 22.
\textsuperscript{45} Greenblatt, \textit{Will in the World}, 78.
servants. Arden’s money comes from business enterprises and opportunities that were new in his time, specifically the new land available for private ownership after Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries. His affluence is similar to that of successful playwrights like Shakespeare in that he has taken well-timed advantage of a burgeoning market. But Arden fails in his duties as a gentleman and as a landlord, and this is the catalyst for his tragedy. Thus the author of *Arden of Faversham* shows an awareness of the problems and potential pitfalls of upward mobility when it is done without wisdom or caution.

The portrayal of middling people and the sociopolitical concerns of the middling classes in drama (or other art forms) is directly related to the study of “social history”; they document the existence and the interests of the larger populace and the effects of that populace on the course of history. While historiography for the stage has many similarities with historiography in print, there are also drastic differences between the two. History plays and historical chronicles came at the same time out of two very different political and ideological contexts. As Rackin explains,

> A major impetus for the Tudor fascination with history was to defend against the forces of modernity, to deny change, and to rationalize a bewildering world in fictions of hereditary privilege. The public commercial theater, by contrast, was a totally new phenomenon, a disreputable place where common players draped in the discarded clothes of aristocrats impersonated their betters for the entertainment (and the pennies) of a disorderly, socially heterogeneous audience. As such, it was deeply involved in the same destabilizing social transformations that produced the nostalgic desire for a stable historical past.\(^{46}\)

Playhouses were, in general, a place of cultural change and new insight and ideas—insight and ideas which came from and catered to those which history often ignored: artisans, merchants, yeomen, and other middling folk. By opening up historiography to the larger populace, the Elizabethan playhouses also opened up historiography to alternative ideas and interpretations.

\(^{46}\) Rackin, *Stages of History*, 22.
The need to maintain commercial prosperity no doubt drove them to produce material that was subversive and shocking, but not so much so that it would drive audiences away; the situation of the playhouses allowed the playwrights to toe that line.

It can seem somewhat paradoxical that a genre of literature which was meant ostensibly for entertainment produced some of the most, to our modern sensibilities, forward-thinking views of historiography. But it is precisely because the public playhouses were a commercial entertainment venue that they could be a place where “social history” thrived before any such concept had been named or studied. Steven Mullaney reminds us it was also the physical and social “place” of theaters which allowed them to take new and revolutionary views on various issues. When a tradesman named Burbage erected the first playhouse in 1576 outside the city walls in Holywell,47 he “established a social and cultural distance that would prove invaluable to the stagecraft of Marlowe and Shakespeare.”48 According to Mullaney, “In a certain sense outcast, the popular stage also possessed, by virtue of its situation, a power to shock or scandalize; while an integral part of Elizabethan culture, the stage was also set apart from that culture.” This situation “provided the stage with a culturally and ideologically removed vantage point from which it could reflect upon its own age with more freedom and license than had hitherto been possible.”49 Because the theatre was a place of such social diversity, facilitated by middling folk, early modern drama is more apt than most other forms of writing to comment on the middling sort and their place in history.

47 Mullaney, The Place of the Stage, 27.
48 Mullaney, The Place of the Stage, 30.
49 Mullaney, The Place of the Stage, 30.
To consider the history play genre, it is useful to look at plays which are exemplary of the genre. The Elizabethan stage was an eclectic arena with middling facilitators and spectators, but the Elizabethan understanding of “history” focused on monarchal dealings and concerns. Plays which we consider typical “history plays” were therefore plays about kings and those closest to them. But the lenses through which playwrights interrogated history and kingship were informed by their status and their profession; even plays which deal with the aristocracy touch on middling concerns of their authors and consider the domestic lives of the characters involved. They are focused on social status and economics in a way that suggests the heightened socioeconomic awareness of the middling playwrights.

In order to make the above case, I want to focus on two plays that have long been considered exemplary of the history play genre: *Edward II* and *Richard III*. These are not necessarily archetypal history plays, but they are well established plays in the genre. These plays and the way they present history are at times problematic for scholars, but they are still widely accepted as “history plays.” As problematic exemplars of the genre, they are indicative of some of the problems of inclusion and exclusion within the history play genre that I want to explore. *Edward II* and *Richard III* are complex and troubling meditations on history, monarchy, and social status which are reflective of the concerns raised in the study of social history. These are plays about kings, but they both show underlying themes of social mobility. They also consider the management or abuse of money, property, and people (both on the national and the household scale) and do so in ways which are familiar to the middling people who wrote the plays and the majority of their audience.
It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how the biography of a writer might influence his or her works, even in cases where a wealth of biographical details are known; but few would argue that the socioeconomic circumstances of playwrights in early modern England would not have informed their plays. The previous chapter touched on Shakespeare’s interest in upward social mobility. In Marlowe’s case, it seems that he was more skeptical of the English class system than Shakespeare, but one scholar suggests that his plays “articulate positive notions of social distinction in non-traditional terms” which “suggest a Marlovian habitus, a disposition derived from Marlowe’s own history and responding to the social and economic challenges confronting him as an articulate, ambitious, and highly educated commoner of lowly provincial origins and few economic resources.”1 This habitus is comprised of “such qualities or capacities as wit or emotional and aesthetic sensibility”2 which create social distinctions in non-traditional terms—terms not based on birthright. Marlowe’s attitude toward aristocracy is skeptical, as evidenced by the fact that he favors artistic and literary passions and sensibilities over birthright as a marker of status. This skepticism toward status by birthright is reflected in his works, though in Edward II it manifests as a consciousness of social inequality that does not necessarily come to any definite conclusions. In the introduction to the New Mermaids edition of Edward II, Stephen Guy-Bray writes, “While Shakespeare’s history plays, broadly speaking, rely on an attitude toward kingship that is never really interrogated, Marlowe’s play—his sole history play—calls into question the nature of English kingship itself.”3

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2 Siemon, “Marlowe and Social Distinction,” 155.
Edward II in Marlowe’s play would prefer the freedom to pursue his relationship with Gaveston rather than be king, and he ignores his duties as England’s monarch. The play paints Edward as both a very poor ruler and a sympathetic man who just wishes to pursue his passions. Edward’s attitude toward kingship, in some moments of the play, shows a wish for downward social mobility; he laments, “what is he, whom rule and empery, / Have not in life or death made miserable?” That is, the play portrays the aristocracy with some envy toward the lower classes, because of the personal freedoms afforded to those in lower social positions.

But aspiration for upward social mobility and the scorn of those in the aristocracy toward social-climbers are much more apparent in Edward II. Elevated social status does not seem to be the main motivation for Gaveston in his relationship with Edward II; Gaveston expresses his deep and genuine affection for Edward in his opening soliloquy. As he delights in the prospect of reuniting with Edward, he exclaims, “Sweet prince, I come; these, these thy amorous lines / Might have enforc'd me to have swum from France.” He compares London to Elysium because “it harbours him I hold so dear / The king, upon whose bosom let me die.” As he imagines his life reunited with Edward, he also makes his desire for higher status apparent: “Farewell base stooping to the lordly peers! / My knee shall bow to none but to the king.” Gaveston delights not only in the prospect of Edward’s company but also his lifestyle. The reactions of Edward’s nobles are also illuminating; when Mortimer Senior explains away Edward’s feelings toward Gaveston as the follies of youth, Mortimer Junior replies,

Uncle, his wanton humor grieves not me,  
But this I scorn, that one so basely born  
Should by his sovereign’s favour grow so pert,
And riot it with the treasure of the realm
While soldiers mutiny for want of pay.\(^8\)

While Edward and Gaveston’s homosexual affair has been the focus of much scholarship in the twentieth century\(^9\), the nobles in the play are more perturbed by the class difference between Gaveston and their king, and by the fact that Edward II misuses the crown’s money to dote on Gaveston.

Christopher Marlowe’s own, much discussed attitudes toward homosexuality and social class no doubt played as much of a role in the way he wrote \textit{Edward II} as did his source material from Holinshed’s \textit{Chronicles}. The deviations which Marlowe takes from Holinshed’s work have been examined by scholars such as Georgia Brown, who claims, “the plot of \textit{Edward II} is quite literally constructed out of the disparities between Marlowe’s text and the historical record.”\(^{10}\) One of the noteworthy deviations Marlowe takes from his source material is, unsurprisingly, a consciousness of differences in social class. Brown explains, “Not only are the \textit{Chronicles} didactic but they define an idealized, unified polity where all classes share the same true English values. \textit{Edward II} does at least acknowledge conflicting class values within the


\(^{9}\) Scholarship on homosexuality in Edward II cannot be ignored in a study on the play. However, questions of Edward’s sexuality and the play’s stance on homosexuality factor very little into my argument. It is worth noting that Edward’s love for Gaveston is defended by Mortimer Senior, who compares Edward to classical heroes who had male lovers (4.393-398) and says “riper years will wean him from such toys” (4.402). The concept of homosexuality in Elizabethan England, as Guy-Bray notes in his introduction to \textit{Edward II}, was very different from our concepts of homosexuality today. Guy-Bray goes so far as to say that “homosexuality cannot be said to have existed before the second half of the nineteenth century” and expresses a preference among scholars for synonymous concepts such as “sodomy,” which “has the merit of including Edward’s love for Gaveston while not excluding many of the other relationships in the play” (xii). When we talk about Edward II’s relationship with Gaveston, we do indeed talk about an illicit sexual relationship between two men; but to early modern sensibilities the relationship between Gaveston and Edward would not dictate the “sexuality” of either character. What makes their relationship illicit is as much the class differences between the two men and the lack of propriety in the king’s behavior as the homosexual or sodomitic nature of the relationship.

Marlowe’s acknowledgement of class differences in a history play suggests that there are different ways “Englishness” might manifest in different English cultures. This shows a multitudinous understanding of English identity compared to Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. This understanding of Englishness being different for different people in different situations also extends to the king himself, whose situation as a king comes into conflict with his personal love affairs. This separation between Edward as a king and Edward as a man is not made in the *Chronicles*, but Marlowe explores it thoroughly.

Brown also notes that “Edward II contributes to sixteenth-century debates about the nature of history and English identity, and expresses anxieties about what is being excluded from the definition of Englishness.”12 The things being “excluded from the definition of Englishness” in Brown’s analysis recall Siemon’s “Marlovian habitus”; Brown notes that wit and poeticism, as well as privacy and emotion, are all key aspects of Marlowe’s story of *Edward II* which are condemned or ignored in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*.13 Ultimately, according to Brown, “*Edward II* challenges the version of English identity that is based on the assertion of masculine values that trivialize privacy and emotion.”14 This, in turn, challenges the notion of English history which praises the stoic and bold leaders while criticizing those who are thoughtful and passionate.

There are many possible reasons Marlowe portrayed his Edward II with so many feminine traits, and Edward’s homosexuality is one possible explanation. It is also worth considering that Marlowe sought to compare and contrast between the feminine king Edward II and the female (but masculine in personality) Elizabeth I. Elizabeth I was, in traditional views of masculine and feminine behavior, quite masculine. She referred to herself in masculine terms when she felt it

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1 Brown, “Tampering with the Records,” 179.
3 Brown, “Tampering with the Records,” 166.
4 Brown, “Tampering with the Records,” 166.
necessary to legitimize her position as a ruler, since the traits believed to make a good ruler were all traditionally masculine.\textsuperscript{15} Meanwhile her potential successor, James I of Scotland, was a very similar figure to Marlowe’s \textit{Edward II}, as many scholars have previously noted. The theater was a place where drama, passion, wit, and intellectualism,\textsuperscript{16} so it is hard to imagine that the playwrights, or stage poets, of Elizabeth I’s time were wholeheartedly convinced of the inferiority of these traditionally feminine traits.

It is impossible to say with any certainty what Marlowe’s intentions were when writing \textit{Edward II}, but it is certain that he intended to comment on Elizabethan and Jacobean Scottish politics in some way. Paulina Kewes explains that \textit{Edward II} can be read in “in quasi-allegorical terms,”\textsuperscript{17} with Edward as a portrait of Elizabeth I, James VI, or Henri III of France. For Kewes, “these competing identifications are neither mutually exclusive nor consistent.”\textsuperscript{18} Of the parallels which Kewes suggests, the comparison of Edward II to James VI is probably the most obvious and the most pertinent. An essay by Lawrence Normand provides a very compelling case for the parallels between Marlowe’s \textit{Edward II} and James VI of Scotland. Normand suggests that the events of Marlowe’s \textit{Edward II} play out almost exactly like an episode in the Scottish King’s real life involving a male “favorite” named Esmé Stewart, and the disapproval of James’s courtiers.\textsuperscript{19} Some of the particulars of \textit{Edward II}, therefore, were taken from more recent events in the life of James VI rather than from historical events or chronicles. But even if \textit{Edward II} is

\textsuperscript{15} Carole Levin, \textit{The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 1-2. Also see Georgia Brown’s, “Tampering with the Records,” 168-170 for a discussion of the masculine traits which were associated with being a good English ruler.
\textsuperscript{16} These traits are all considered “feminine” traits by Brown, “Tampering with the Records,” 166-169.
\textsuperscript{18} Kewes, “Marlowe, History, and Politics,” 139.
as much or more about James VI than Edward II, and even if Marlowe is displaying an
apprehension about James’s potential claim to the English throne, it certainly does not vilify
Edward the way that Shakespeare’s Richard III vilifies its titular character. Marlowe instead
explores a dichotomy between public and private lives by showing the two sides of his Edward II
as he conducts his private affairs and public affairs.\(^{20}\) He shows that trouble arises when he
cannot separate the two, as the Mortimers suggest he ought to,\(^ {21}\) and private concerns begin to
 supersede public affairs.

In Edward’s private moments with Gaveston, or the moments when he is lamenting his ill
fortune in being separated from Gaveston, it is difficult not to sympathize with him. Yet those
who oppose Edward II have understandable political reasons for their rebellion as well. As
Queen Isabella passionately explains, “Misgoverned kings are cause of all this wrack; / And,
Edward, thou art one among them all, / Whose looseness hath betrayed thy land to spoil.”\(^ {22}\)
Ribner characterizes Edward II as “a tragedy of character in which a potentially good man comes
to destruction because of inherent weaknesses which make him incapable of coping with a crisis
he himself has helped to create,” and adds that “in his downfall he carries with him the
sympathies of the audience.”\(^ {23}\) Marlowe’s version of Edward II takes a close look at the
dichotomy between Edward the man and Edward the king; in doing so he creates a portrait of a
man who is privately sympathetic but incompetent in his public affairs. In Young Mortimer’s
appeal to the other lords, he speaks of revenge “for the open wrongs and injuries / Edward hath

\(^{20}\) Scene 4 in particular.

\(^{21}\) Marlowe, Edward II, 4.387-420.

\(^{22}\) Marlowe, Edward II, 17.9-11.

\(^{23}\) Irving Ribner, The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare, revised edition (London: Methuen & Co,
1965), 123-124.
done to us, his Queen and land”\textsuperscript{24} but he also seeks peace and stability for the monarchy that Edward II is unable to provide, and he hopes:

- That England’s queen in peace may repossess
- Her dignities and honours: and withal
- We may remove these flatterers from the king,
- That havoc England’s wealth and treasury.\textsuperscript{25}

Both the tragic hero and the antagonists in \textit{Edward II} are presented as morally decent people who have legitimate reasons for behaving the way they do, even when that behavior is morally reprehensible. This concept is mirrored in \textit{Arden of Faversham}, as we will see in the following chapter.

Many scholars have read \textit{Richard III} as being less morally complex than \textit{Edward II}, and the play is often read as a work of pro-Tudor propaganda. The War of the Roses was still relatively recent history in the 1590s, and Queen Elizabeth I was the direct descendent of Henry VII. Therefore many scholars have focused on \textit{Richard III}’s plot as a claim of Tudor legitimacy. There is plenty of compelling evidence to suggest that one of Shakespeare’s main arguments in \textit{Richard III} is an argument for Tudor legitimacy. By portraying Richard III as a villainous hunchback, it would seem that Shakespeare’s allegiance to the Tudor line is obvious. But to simply say that \textit{Richard III} is a Tudor propaganda play is to ignore the intricacies presented by Shakespeare’s play. It should be remembered that \textit{Richard III} is also a play which signals the end of a problematic dynasty written as Elizabeth I grew old without a direct heir to carry on the Tudor line. Shakespeare’s take on Richard III depicts the Tudor house’s glory, but it is also necessary to consider what the play suggests about the impending dynastic shift for England.

\textsuperscript{24} Marlowe, \textit{Edward II}, 17.20-21.
\textsuperscript{25} Marlowe, \textit{Edward II}, 17.4.23-26.
Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* as the Tudor dynasty neared an inevitable end, so a claim for Tudor legitimacy would have spoken very little to anxieties over succession.

It is perhaps possible that Shakespeare aimed to support James VI’s ascension to the English throne by creating a narrative of unification between two houses with clashing claims to the throne. After Henry of Richmond defeats Richard in battle, he gives a speech in which he immediately takes on his role as King Henry VII and begins making royal decrees. One of his first announcements is that “as we have ta'en the sacrament, / We will unite the white rose and the red”\(^{26}\) by marrying the heir of York House, Elizabeth. The joining of the two houses heralds a new age, for “England hath long been mad, and scarr'd herself.”\(^{27}\) The unification of the houses of York and of Lancaster promises peace for the future:

> O, now, let Richmond and Elizabeth,  
> The true succeeders of each royal house,  
> By God's fair ordinance conjoin together!  
> And let their heirs, God, if thy will be so.  
> Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,  
> With smiling plenty and fair prosperous days!\(^ {28}\)

Considering the troubled history between England and Scotland, and particularly between Elizabeth I and Mary I of Scotland, the unification of the two countries may have heralded peace for many. *Richard III* certainly seems to suggest that unification of warring houses could be a good thing for England; and what is often read as a claim of Tudor legitimacy can more broadly be read as a philosophical assertion that indirect lines of succession can still mean glory for England if they promise peace and order for the country. But such ideas would have been

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27 Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 5.5.23.
28 Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 5.5.29-34.
sensitive, considering the Scottish king’s ambitions for the English throne, especially when espoused in a genre which for many was a way to express English national identity.

All of this makes clear that early modern playwrights had trouble with the idea of a singular English identity. By virtue of being written for large masses, plays are less likely to take for granted anything about unified English identity. History play are certainly concerned with national identity and Englishness; but the concern shown by Marlowe and Shakespeare is more of a meditation on the complexities and imperfections of English history, identity, and politics than it is a propagandistic aggrandizement of any singular notion about politics, history, or Englishness. Marlowe’s skepticism is apparent on the surface of Edward II and it has been studied extensively. Richard III seems less subversive at first read, but scholars have still noticed some ways that Shakespeare seems to question or challenge some of the same ideas that Marlowe does in Edward II.

There is a scene in Richard III which stands out for many, in which Prince Edward is brought to the tower. The young prince begins an odd line of questioning about the history of the tower as he is being imprisoned.

PRINCE: Did Julius Caesar build that place, my lord?
BUCKINGHAM: He did, my gracious lord, begin that place, Which Since succeeding ages have re-edified.
PRINCE: Is it upon record, or else reported Successively from age to age, he built it?
BUCKINGHAM: Upon record, my gracious lord.29

Phyllis Rackin notes that the Prince’s precocious inquiry is “anachronistic—historically as well as biographically premature. For it was not until the sixteenth century that Englishmen subjected the records and monuments of the past to the kind of critical scrutiny that the doomed prince

29 Shakespeare, Richard III, 3.1.69-73.
brings to bear upon his final prison.”\textsuperscript{30} The historical interest and scrutiny displayed by the prince are therefore a reflection of Shakespeare’s own time as much as the time which he portrays. It is, in short, a feature of the culture which sprung mainstream interest in chronicles and history plays. Brian Walsh analyzes this scene, noting the prince’s interest in both historical facts and historiographical processes (oral and written); Walsh concludes, “This odd exchange is the play’s most explicit reflection on practices of historiography. In one view, it signals a critical-historical sensibility on the part of the Prince, who questions the evidence about the Tower and seeks to compare its various historical traditions.”\textsuperscript{31} Later in that same scene, the prince considers the ways that historical records and fame allow a person’s legacy to continue impacting the lives of those in the present day:

\begin{verbatim}
That Julius Caesar was a famous man,
With what his valour did enrich his wit,
His wit set down to make his valure live.
Death makes no conquest of this conqueror,
For now he lives in fame, though not in life.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{verbatim}

The Prince’s astute conclusion is that the written narrative of Caesar’s deeds, “upon record” rather than “reported,” that allows Caesar’s fame and his deeds to live on. This conclusion, as Walsh points out, “is supported by the evolving historical culture of early modern England, where the proliferation of print histories in the sixteenth century gradually marginalized and deauthorized oral history.”\textsuperscript{33} Walsh goes on to note that “these lines being spoken in a play about the past prompts us to consider further where dramatic performance, an aural-visual form of representation, fits into the written / oral history binary.”\textsuperscript{34} Plays are, as a form, written with the

\textsuperscript{31} Brian Walsh, \textit{Shakespeare, the Queen’s Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 139.
\textsuperscript{32} Shakespeare, \textit{Richard III}, 3.1.84-88.
\textsuperscript{33} Walsh, \textit{Shakespeare, the Queen's Men}, 139.
\textsuperscript{34} Walsh, \textit{Shakespeare, the Queen's Men}, 139.
intention of being spoken, acted and adapted. They have the authority of written information in that they can be copied and reprinted without people’s fallible memory or personal biases changing the narrative at every retelling. Yet the need for adaptation and interpretation in the translation from written word to performance is inherent in the form; the history play genre cannot claim the same textual purity that a chronicle might. As is pointed out in Palfrey and Stern’s *Shakespeare in Parts*, the written products of the Elizabethan stage were “parts” for each individual actor rather than complete printed versions of the plays that were performed. The tangible written products used for theatrical performances were disjointed and incomplete records which necessitated the speech of actors in order to put them together.

There is some irony in this moment of self-conscious meditation on history in *Richard III*, because of the lasting impact Shakespeare’s play has had on perceptions of Richard III as a historical figure. Walsh notes, “Historians routinely acknowledge that it was not Shakespeare who invented the demonic image of Richard. They point out, rather, how strongly his play has fixed that image.” Whereas *Edward II* takes a more ambivalent moral approach to its historical material, *Richard III* vilifies Richard III and glorifies Henry VII to a point that is, in the eyes of some scholars, undeserved. Yet as we have seen, the play overall is not as morally simple as it seems on the surface, despite its obvious portrayal of a “good” king against a villainous usurper. Though it may paint the Tudor house as a good and righteous royal house, that same house was, in Shakespeare’s time, about to end without a proper English heir to the throne. And there is

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36 There is an exception in the case of “allowed books” or “approved books” which were kept by a playhouse scribe and submitted to the Master of Revels for approval. But these complete scripts were not the ones used by the players to learn their parts and perform. One scholar has also noted the frequent discrepancies between approved books and the parts from which players learned their lines, see Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 235.
37 Walsh, *Shakespeare, the Queen's Men*, 169.
moral ambiguity in the fact that Shakespeare wrote, at the end of Elizabeth I’s reign, a play in which the end of a previous dynasty meant glory, peace, and unity for England.

The way that both Edward II and Richard III involve young heirs to the throne is also worth examining. The presence of these children suggest a consideration for the future in plays that otherwise seem very much fixated on the past. At the end of Richard III, Henry VII speaks of his heirs and the peaceful and united kingdom they will reign over. In Edward II, rule is passed to Edward’s son immediately upon the death of Edward II; similarly to when the English rule is passed on to Henry VII at the end of Richard III, Edward III at the end of Edward II immediately begins making royal decrees. In the case of young Edward III, his first orders are for the death of Young Mortimer and the imprisonment of Queen Isabella for the murder of Edward II.\(^{38}\) The final scene of the play ends with Edward III mourning for his father while presenting the head of Mortimer:

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Sweet father, here unto thy murdered ghost
I offer up this wicked traitor's head;
And let these tears, distilling from mine eyes,
Be witness of my grief and innocency.\(^{39}\)
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Much like the ending of Richard III, Edward II ends with order being restored (at least temporarily) to the English throne. Edward III’s mention of his “innocency” in this moment is noteworthy; while it is possible that he means to express his literal innocence of the crime of murdering his father, young Edward was never suspected in that crime. It could instead be meant as an indication of the “innocency” of his rule, promising a rebirth for the English crown where the monarch is guilty of neither murder, nor treason against a previous monarch, nor sodomy.

\(^{38}\) Marlowe, Edward II, 25.50-82.
These adolescent characters and their place in the “future” of the plays’ events also harken back to the notion that “history is always constructed in retrospect.” When the children ask questions about history (like the prince in *Richard III*) or make judgements about the events of the play (as Edward III does at the end of *Edward II*) they are reconstructing history for their own understandings in that present moment. The prince in *Richard III*, unaware of Richard’s plots, makes judgements about the valour of Julius Caesar. As much as *Edward II* is a morally complicated play, young Edward III has no qualms about condemning the murder of his father and punishing all those involved. Edward III thus presents a lens through which we might view the events and make moral judgements, even though it is clear in much of *Edward II* that Edward was a problematic ruler.

Because “history is always constructed in retrospect,” so too are the judgements and analyses that we attach to past events. The performance of history is constructed in reverse and inseparable from its own moment in time. In chapter 1, I explored the seemingly dichotomous nature of plays which are, on one hand, able to supply “a pretense of sensual contact with the vanished past through the bodies that move and speak on stage,” but are on the other hand constructed from a complex and often messy amalgamation of people, classes, ideas, and times. Georgia Brown comments on Marlowe’s inability to fully embody history, saying,

*Edward II* is a drama of substitution, and explores how experience, as well as history, is determined by mere traces and partial clues…The characters frequently only have contact with a verbal substitute for an absent presence. Scenes are constructed around reports, gossip, and opinions about third parties, and the play itself participates in this culture of hearsay and rumor as it spreads its own stories about Edward II.

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40 Rackin, *Stages of History*, 59.
41 Walsh, *Shakespeare, the Queen’s Men*, 1.
42 Brown, “Tampering with the Records,” 175.
These different and conflicting elements of theater are part of what makes it so relevant for social history; the substitution, rumor, and pretense of contact with history even though it can never fully be captured are all inherent elements of the way that middling people interacted with historical and political changes. The majority of middling people had little power to affect change and no direct contact with the monarchy, so changes in political situations were felt indirectly. Yet there were examples of a select few who were born into the middling class and rose to become peers with Princes; this no doubt provided the middling populace with some pretense of contact with the aristocracy, or the belief that it was possible (if difficult) to become movers and shapers of the realm. The middling situation of indirect contact with the aristocracy mixed with aspirations for more power and status is exactly what is expressed in historiographical drama, either directly or metaphorically.

For a literal example, there is act 2, scene 3 of Richard III, which is played out entirely by unnamed citizens. The citizens in this scene have just learned of the death of King Edward IV, and they express their concerns about royal succession. The heir to the throne is young, and the citizens are worried about the corrupt adults who might claim power: “O, full of danger is the Duke of Gloucester, / And the Queen’s sons and brothers haught and proud.” 43 This scene suddenly shifts focus from the aristocratic families to mere citizens who have no direct connection with the ruling people, but for whom the ruler of their country is nonetheless important. The opening of Edward II depicts, not the king and his retinue, but Gaveston encountering three poor men who seeks Gaveston’s help; one of them is a soldier who fought against the Scots but who has nonetheless become a beggar. Since young Mortimer later mentions that “soldiers mutiny for want of pay” 44 while Edward II spends the crown’s money

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43 Shakespeare, Richard III, 2.3.27-28.
44 Marlowe, Edward II, 4.407.
doting on Gaveston, we can assume that these men are victims of royal mismanagement. In these brief moments we see history plays portraying mere English citizens in a story of English history. We see the lives of everyday citizens portrayed onstage in this way significantly more in *Arden of Faversham*, but it is important to see that even in more traditional history plays, playwrights were considering the way that “history,” affected or concerned the general populace.

It has been argued that domestic tragedies were revolutionary in the fact that they imply that middling people were just as capable of being tragic, and just as worthy of the idea of “tragedy” as kings and queens. For example, this argument is made by Lena Cowin Orlin when she asserts that *Arden of Faversham* is “an elevation of strife and murder in a mere gentleman’s house to the genre of tragedy.”\(^45\) But before the domestic tragedy came into popularity, drama was already making the suggestion that kings, queens, and classical heroes were just as human as the middling spectators who watched their dramas unfold upon the stage. Showing kings like Edward II and Richard III on the stage meant portraying both the public and private lives of these monarchs, showing them as both national rulers and also as people. The personal depiction of monarchs offered by the dramatic form was no doubt of interest to middling sensibilities. The effects of this portrayal meant that monarchs became flawed human characters on the stage and were much more complex and emotionally evocative than in the dry and somewhat detached chronicles on which the plays were based.

In this regard, it should be noted that Thomas More’s *History of King Richard III* is a more lively and theatrical prose than the chronicles of Holinshed or Hall. What Shakespeare adds, that More’s version cannot offer, are the soliloquy moments in which an actor playing Richard III speaks directly to the audience and shares with them a seemingly private (but, by

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virtue of the large open playhouse, very public) moment of intrigue. At the end of act 1, in a particularly theatrical fashion, Richard soliloquizes his plots and lets the audience in on his intentions:

I’ll in to urge his hatred more to Clarence
With lies well steeled with weighty arguments,
And if I fail not in my deep intent,
Clarence hath not another day to live;
Which done, God take King Edward to His mercy,
And leave the world for me to bustle in.
For then, I’ll marry Warwick’s youngest daughter.
What though I killed her husband and her father?
The readiest way to make the wench amends
Is to become her husband and her father;
The which will I, not all so much for love
As for another secret close intent
By marrying her which I must reach unto.\(^{46}\)

In the iconic opening soliloquy of *Richard III*, we are made aware of Richard’s reasons for his villainous behavior, and offered, perhaps, a brief moment of sympathy for the character:

Why I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to see my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity.
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.\(^{47}\)

This speech, rather than being simply about political ambition or other national concerns, expresses the emotional reasons for Richard III’s villainy. This is a “private” moment shared with the audience alone, but secret from any of the other characters in the play. There is an intimacy in these moments where secrets are shared with the audience by one of the characters, and that intimacy is unparalleled in any of the chronicles.

\(^{46}\) Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 1.1.147-159.
Yet another one of the notable ways that early modern theater comments on its society is its preoccupation with the public and the private spheres of society. Elizabethan plays have unique ways of blurring the lines between the private and public spheres, and these are especially pronounced in history plays like *Richard III* and *Edward II*, which portray the private lives of public figures and the political implications of their personal affairs. As characters on the stage, Edward II and Richard III, as well as their families, courtiers, and political opponents, all display themselves as individuals with human personalities, passions, and flaws. These monarchs as humans are in some ways separate from, but also inextricably linked with, the course of history as a whole. In staged moments of private passion between Edward II and Gaveston, or the moments when Richard III secretly plots to take the throne, figures who, as monarchs, are embodiments of England, become mere humans. In performance, histories of countries and monarchs became histories of people—perhaps not histories of “the people” the way that one might expect from modern understandings of “social history”—but nonetheless histories of people. The men playing the roles of kings and queens were actually middling folk, and the audience members who watched them could look at these powerful aristocratic figures and see in them a person with basic human needs and concerns, much like themselves.

The notion of “privacy” in early modern England changed dramatically during the reign of Henry VIII and in the years that followed. It has been suggested that the socioeconomic shifts during his reign were the main reasons for these changes. Lena Cowin Orlin’s book, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England*, explores the history of “privacy” and its roots in early modern England. She claims that “the cultural phenomena associated with what we call ‘private life’ changed in the wake of the Reformation” and points out that the very idea

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of “privacy” is inextricably linked to the middling early modern household.\textsuperscript{50} Because of the surge in middling landowners in the sixteenth century, the notion of privacy became very much a middling social concern.\textsuperscript{51} In her critical work on the topic, Orlin frequently returns to the early modern proverb “A man’s house is his castle.” If a man’s house is, indeed, like a castle, then a man himself could be a king or duke within his own home. Individual households were likened to microcosmic nations in both the proverbs and the laws of early modern England. If a wife or servant murdered the head of their household (as happens in \textit{Arden of Faversham}), it was considered a crime of “petty treason.” As this analogy between man and king became proverbial, and the number of middling, seemingly inconsequential men became lords in their own “castles,” it is easy to see how the time was ripe for a fresh notion of the lives and functions of “private” people—that is, middling, non-political people. But one could also flip the comparison and consider what the blurring of the separation between private and public figures could change views on the aristocracy. For if a man’s house is his castle, then by the same token any castle is simply a household. This explains, in part, the new light that theatrical productions shed on the private lives of important historical figures.

The Elizabethan interest in private and public lives (and the blurring of these lines throughout the sixteenth century) is particularly apparent in Elizabethan drama. The history plays I have discussed contribute to the blending of these two seemingly opposite—yet not entirely distinct—social spheres by portraying the private lives of very public figures. Alternatively, \textit{Arden of Faversham} explores the public implications of the actions of “private” citizens with no


\textsuperscript{51} The increase in land-owning gentry is due in no small part to Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries, that same event which allowed for the surge of commercial theaters. These notions of embourgeoisement and their relationship to \textit{Arden of Faversham} are explored in Orlin’s essay, “Man’s House as His Castle in ‘Arden of Faversham’” and will be looked at in-depth in my next chapter.
direct connection to the royal crown. I will turn in the next chapter to an analysis of *Arden of Faversham* and show how it functions as a history play just like the plays explored in this chapter.

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52 Lena Cowen Orlin’s extensive work on domestic drama shows us the importance of “domestic” and “private” affairs to our understanding of social history in early modern English literature. She connects social history with theater and with early modern understandings of private life; but she nonetheless thinks of *Arden of Faversham* as a domestic tragedy and does not consider it as a history play.
Written within a few years of both *Edward II* and *Richard III*, *Arden of Faversham* is heralded by many as the first domestic tragedy and is considered an archetype of the genre. This genre of tragic plays, which focuses on middle class characters, began in the late sixteenth century and enjoyed continued popularity in the centuries following *Arden of Faversham*.\(^1\) One scholar calls it “The most famous of all Elizabethan domestic tragedies, and unquestionably the best.”\(^2\) As a domestic tragedy, *Arden of Faversham* showed that middling people were just as capable of being tragic figures as the aristocracy (for whom tragedy had been traditionally reserved). Yet the play’s fixation on early modern sociopolitical issues and history make the play as good an example of a history play as it is of a domestic tragedy. *Arden of Faversham* is a play which portrays middling folk as analogous to monarchs, and as heroic figures capable of the same complexities and depths of emotion as Aristotelian tragic heros; but it is more importantly a play which legitimizes the middling experience as a crucial component in the narrative of early modern history.

We must therefore question why this play isn’t read more frequently as a history play, perhaps a “domestic history” play or a “social history” play. Domestic tragedies and history plays are not necessarily mutually exclusive genre designations, but the two genres connote very different types of plays, and it is therefore necessary to explore *Arden of Faversham*’s interactions with history if one wishes to claim its inclusion in the history play genre. Arden’s appearance in Holinshed’s *Chronicles* show that the narrative has always been an important work of sixteenth century historiography. By portraying middling folk in a work of

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\(^2\) Adams, *Domestic or Homiletic Tragedy*, 100.
historiography, *Arden of Faversham* considers the place of the middling folk in history, society, and in the future of England. Tom Lockwood writes that the play is “a series of powerfully realised stagings of issues and ideas that were as live in the early 1590s of the play’s probable first performance as they had been in the 1550s when its events took place.” It is no wonder that previous scholars have considered *Arden of Faversham* as a possible history play. But these scholars have hesitated to make an argument for its inclusion in the genre canon. Lockwood goes on to explain that “although it does so through the frame of an urban rather than a royal family, *Arden of Faversham* is concerned precisely with the same issues of rule, legitimacy, and national identity as that other great genre of the 1590s, the English chronicle history play” Even as Lockwood illuminates the play’s interest in important historical issues, he proceeds to classify *Arden of Faversham* as “among the earliest English domestic tragedies.”

Literary scholars focusing on history plays have made note of *Arden of Faversham* as a play on “contemporary history” and as a play which does “represent the past” but is not included in the “generic distinction” of history plays. Richard Helgerson writes about Arden’s story in the context of historiography and lists seven “relatively distinct provinces, all outside the

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4 Frank Whigham, in chapter 2 of *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), boldly writes “Arden of Faversham is a history play” (63). He makes this claim without adequately exploring the impact of such a claim or making a strong argument for its inclusion in the genre. Whigham’s claim that Arden of Faversham is a history play rests solely on its representation of the aftermath of Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries; moreover Whigham fails to take into account the longstanding tradition of reading Arden of Faversham as a domestic tragedy.
5 Lockwood, *Introduction to Arden of Faversham*, xv.
usual bounds of serious historiography”\textsuperscript{9} under which \textit{Arden of Faversham} can be classified: “‘vulgar’ or popular history,” “the history of crime,” “domestic history or the history of private life,” “women’s history,” “local history,” “socioeconomic history,” and “anecdotal history.”\textsuperscript{10} Helgerson claims that these subcategories of history into which he situates \textit{Arden of Faversham} can give us a sense “of historiographical commonality and difference across time, of the shifting ways in which the limits of what counts as ‘history’ have been configured and maintained.”\textsuperscript{11} But Helgerson’s consciousness of the history “on the margins”\textsuperscript{12} to which \textit{Arden of Faversham} belongs also gives us a sense of what has been traditionally excluded from history, and those things that are sometimes still relegated to marginalized sub-categories of history. Helgerson’s definition of “‘vulgar’ or popular history” as meaning “history of the common people”\textsuperscript{13} echoes Keith Wrightson’s “new social history.”\textsuperscript{14} This idea of social history may dominate twentieth-century studies of history, but it was nevertheless long excluded from traditional views of history and is still sometimes marginalized as a subcategory of history. Usually this marginalization stems from an early modern understanding of “history” and the “history play” genre, coupled with an instinct to use early modern conceptions of genre to analyze early modern literature. But as Alastair Fowler reminds us, genre designations are useful only if they are able to change with trends in readership and scholarship in order to better serve readers and critics in their understandings of literature and literary genres.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{10} Helgerson, “Murder in Faversham,” 136-145.
\textsuperscript{11} Helgerson, “Murder in Faversham,” 135.
\textsuperscript{12} Helgerson, “Murder in Faversham,” 135.
\textsuperscript{13} Helgerson, “Murder in Faversham,” 136.
\textsuperscript{14} Keith Wrightson, \textit{English Society 1530-1680} (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 12.
Compared with the overwhelming scholarly output on the form, functions, and genre distinctions of history plays, there is significantly less scholarly discourse on what exactly makes a “domestic tragedy.” It has been defined as “a tragedy of common people, ordinarily set in the domestic scene, dealing with personal and family relationships rather than with large affairs of state, presented in a realistic fashion, and ending in a tragic or otherwise serious manner.”\(^{16}\) This definition of the domestic tragedy situates it opposite the history play, especially since the definition specifically states that the domestic tragedy would not deal with large affairs of state. But coming back to my argument that history plays should be reexamined through the lens of “social history,” domestic affairs become just as worthy as national affairs for subjects of history plays. Stories centered on middling folk and commoners are particularly important when looking at the historiography of social history, as these people comprised a majority of the population—a majority which was neither powerless nor invisible, even though the attention of historians is often focused on the aristocracy. When the domestic tragedy came into popularity, one of its main divergences from regular tragedy was its “departure from Aristotelian definitions of the tragic as involving the actions of kings or princes.”\(^{17}\) Thus the entire existence of domestic tragedy as a genre suggests that middling people were just as capable of being tragic figures as the aristocracy. The same can be said for a work of historiography which centers around middling people, like *Arden of Faversham*. Arden’s inclusion in Holinshed’s *Chronicles* suggests a consciousness, even in the 1590s, that middling people and their stories could be seen as part of history.

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\(^{16}\) Adams, *Domestic or Homiletic Tragedy*, 1-2.

\(^{17}\) Catherine Richardson, *Domestic Life and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 5.
The question of domestic matters as part of history appears explicitly in Holinshed’s *Chronicles* when Arden’s murder is called a “private matter.” Even Holinshed would probably have considered *Arden of Faversham* a “domestic drama” or a “domestic tragedy.” The story of Arden in the *Chronicles* is a lengthy anecdote under the reign of Edward VI (since the *Chronicles* are organized by monarchal reign) which begins:

About this time there was at Feversham in Kent a gentleman named Arden, most cruelly murthered and slaine by the procurement of his owne wife. The which murther, for the horriblenesse thereof, although otherwise it may seeme to be but a private matter, and therefore as it were impertinent to this historie, I have thought good to set it forth somewhat at large.\(^{18}\)

Impertinent or not, Arden’s murder is documented quite extensively in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. Helgerson notes that the *Chronicles* mention approximately twenty-three murders (not including political assassinations) but that most of them are condensed to a sentence or two. “The Arden account,” Helgerson continues, “goes on for a full seven tightly printed folio columns, nearly five thousand words, considerably more than he gives many events of state.”\(^{19}\) Something about Arden’s murder captured the imaginations of early modern audiences enough to grant it a significant place in mainstream historiography.

The reason given in the *Chronicles* for its inclusion is its “horribleness.” This undefined and unspecific quality of “horribleness” is the only clue given as to what made the murder historiographically relevant to early modern chroniclers. Helgerson claims:

The “horribleness” Holinshed vaunts is obvious enough: a wife’s adultery leading to the murder of her husband; servants rebelling against their master; neighbors turning against neighbor; the engagement first of a prisoner and then of ‘a notorious murdering ruffian’ and his vagabond companion; a whole series of grotesque failed attempts, culminating in a successfully brutal murder in the victim’s own parlor; and finally eight spectacular public executions.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{19}\) Helgerson, “Murder in Faversham,” 133.

\(^{20}\) Helgerson, “Murder in Faversham,” 133.
But what Helgerson takes to be obvious is worth looking into more deeply. Helgerson seems to conflate the sensationalized, grotesque violence and the extreme political and social transgressions under the concept of “horribleness.” In fact, Holinshed’s use of the word is ambiguous as to which sort of “horribleness” he believes makes the story worth including in a historical chronicle. The brutality of the murder, the “series of grotesque failed attempts,” and the cast of seedy characters were no doubt marketable (much as similar tropes in crime fiction continue to have market appeal today), but it is the sociopolitical scandal of the murder which makes it notable as a work of historiography. With its depiction of adultery and servant rebellion, *Arden of Faversham* portrays sociopolitical upheavals that are not present in other plays of the late sixteenth century which are equally violent and grotesque. Arden’s “successfully brutal murder” is grotesquely and sensationally violent. The murder taking place “in the victim’s own parlor” presents a bold disregard for the household hierarchy as its patriarch is overthrown. The final “spectacular executions” are also violent, but there is a political undertone to the fact that the murderers are executed for the crime of “petty treason.”

Legally, the murder of a household patriarch by his wife and/or servants in the sixteenth century was considered an act of petty treason. Householders were thought of as “petty rulers” and their household was likened to a microcosm of a kingdom. Lena Cowen Orlin has written extensively on domestic drama and domestic affairs in early modern England; she explains in an article on *Arden of Faversham* that middling householders were depicted “as figures of order presiding over domestic microcosms of the state.”\(^\text{21}\) In her book, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England*, she asserts:

> The domestic tragedy was authorized or, more precisely, enabled by analogical thought, by the persuasion that the microcosm enjoyed the same principles of order as the

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macrocosm and suffered corresponding challenges of disorder. By this logic, the individual household was as susceptible to violations of order as was the state, and, moreover, those violations had an equal theoretical resonance for the state and its constituents.²²

Domestic concerns were considered to be of importance to political matters, even in the sixteenth century, under the assumption that a household was a microcosm of a kingdom. Orlin even says that “during the sixteenth century…the phrase ‘a man’s house is his castle’ became proverbial.”²³

By this notion, domestic affairs and domestic disorder were considered to be microcosmic parallels of larger, national disorder. Arden’s death is therefore a middling parallel of monarchical overthrows such as those in Edward II and Richard III. Here again the dichotomy between private and public spheres are complicated, because of the public impact of what is ostensibly a “private matter.” But it is not only the parallels between Arden and other kings which suggest that Arden’s overthrow is of political importance. The “public” and “private” aspects of history have always been intertwined, and recognition of this fact became more and more widespread and its implications discussed in the sixteenth century. As much as Holinshed suggests that there is a clear line between “private matters” and matters of “history,” his self-conscious inclusion of Arden’s murder betrays Holinshed’s realization that the two are not as separate as he might claim.

Scholars like Helgerson have tried to define this “horribleness thereof,” in an attempt to pinpoint exactly which elements of the murder make it so noteworthy for Holinshed. Such attempts to understand Holinshed’s “horribleness” are worthwhile; though just as we cannot know the minds of early modern playwrights as they wrote their plays, we also cannot know the minds of the chroniclers who put the Arden story into Holinshed’s Chronicles. Catherine

²³ Orlin, Private Matters, 2.
Belsey’s interpretation of “‘this ‘horribleness,’ which identifies Alice Arden’s domestic crime as belonging to the public arena of history” states that it is not “a matter of the physical details of the murder, or even the degree of premeditation involved. On the contrary, the scandal lies in Alice Arden’s challenge to the institution of marriage.”

Marriage is only one of the socioeconomic issues explored in *Arden of Faversham*, but it is an important one in the context of social history. The concept of divorce was under scrutiny and heated debate in the sixteenth century, reaching a high point in the 1590s. *Arden of Faversham* takes a definitive stance on divorce (though it does not say so explicitly) when Alice tells Mosby, “Might I without control / Enjoy thee still, then Arden should not die. / But seeing I cannot, therefore let him die.”

Alice acknowledges that her position as an unhappy wife drives her to murder, for there is no way for her to be rid of her husband without violence. She then asserts that “Love is a god, and marriage is but words,” justifying her actions while also questioning the very nature of marriage in a way that echoed some of the debates of the 1590s.

People on both sides of the divorce debates recognized the public issues of state which hinged on conceptions of individual marriages and divorces. Since it was assumed that a male head of a household was like the “monarch” of his own home, the dissolution of a marriage had troubling echoes with regard to the monarchy. Belsey even suggests that new concepts of marriage and divorce laid the foundation for justifying the English revolution in 1642.

*Arden of Faversham* does not overtly condone divorce, but rather suggests that if a marriage is bad

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27 *Arden of Faversham*, I.101.
28 Belsey, “Alice Arden’s Crime,” 143-144.
29 Belsey, “Alice Arden’s Crime,” 143-144.
enough, it will end; if violence is the only way to end it, then people who would otherwise seek 
divorce might be driven to violence. This may not have been the truth, but it was certainly a 
popular conception in the late sixteenth century. According to Belsey, “The existing historical 
evidence gives no reason to believe that there was a major outbreak of women murdering their 
husbands in the sixteenth century. What it does suggest, however, is a widespread belief that they 
were likely to do so.”30 The concern over dissatisfied wives murdering their husbands reflects a 
sociopolitical outlook that acknowledged that, whether it was ever justifiable or not, rebellion 
was a possibility which could and did occur, in both the household and national arenas.

In Edward II and Richard III we see similar themes of overthrow on a monarchical level, 
and these overthrows are portrayed with a similar attitude. Whether or not regicide is justifiable 
(Eduard II is notably ambiguous with regard to whether or not the overthrow is justified) these 
history plays serve as a reminder that revolution is a possibility, one which had happened in the 
past and could happen again. Exactly what circumstances could lead to or justify a rebellion and 
how they might do so are explored in plays about regicide just as they are explored in the story 
of Arden’s overthrow. In Edward II and Arden of Faversham, the fault of the incompetent ruler 
for his own overthrow is called into question. Neither Arden nor Edward II are portrayed as evil 
men; their murders are punished at the end of the play, rather than glorified. But they are both 
portrayed as problematic rulers whose inability to properly assert their authority become the 
reasons for their overthrow, and one cannot ignore the ways that each ruler’s own shortcomings 
bring about their overthrows.

Exactly how much sympathy Arden deserves, and how much blame, depend very much 
on the production and the audience; but the play makes clear that failures on Arden’s part to

adequately manage his money, status, and household are all direct catalysts of his murder. One scholar argues that both the play and the chronicle make Arden culpable in his own murder, because of his poor management of his household and his willful ignorance of his wife’s affair with Mosby. Randall Martin writes, “Arden’s self-willed cuckoldry was not merely a peculiar factor leading to a sensational private tragedy, but a public scandal with disturbing social and political implications.”

Similarly to Belsey, Martin suggests that the problems in Arden’s marriage and his household are not merely “personal,” “private,” or “domestic” problems, but rather impact the very structure of society. The flaws which lead Arden to his own demise are numerous, and in many ways they echo the flaws of Edward II in Marlowe’s play. Arden’s transgressions are not sexual—in fact, some readings of Arden of Faversham suggest that Arden is more than likely impotent. But just as Edward II proves to be an incompetent ruler incapable of managing his property and his subjects, Arden too is portrayed as an incompetent householder who fails to adequately manage his wife, his servants, and (if Alice is to be believed) his money. Martin suggests that Arden may actively and willingly allow his wife’s affair to continue because the affair suits his own goal. Holinshed’s Chronicles accuse Arden of ignoring his wife’s affair because “he would not offend hir, and so loose the benefit which he hoped to gaine at some of hir freénds hands in bearing with hir lewdnesse.” This is often read as an indication of Arden’s socioeconomic ambitions, assuming that his prospects for upward mobility stand to be helped by his wife’s friends, as Martin points out. But the exact nature of the “benefit” which Arden

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33 Holinshed, Holinshed’s Chronicles, 3:1024.
hopes to gain is left ambiguous by Holinshed, and the playwright does not explain or illuminate Alice’s role in Arden’s ambitions.

Martin goes so far as to suggest that the affair could benefit Arden by producing a child, if Arden is indeed impotent or otherwise unable to impregnate his wife. Arden and Alice in the play are childless (in contrast to the chronicle account which mentions that they have two daughters). Without a son, the future of Arden’s property after his death is uncertain. Whether or not it would have been preferable to a gentleman for his wife to produce an illegitimate child than to remain childless, the possibilities of inheritance and legacy are brought up a few times in the play. In the third line of the play, Franklin tells Arden that the lands of Faversham have been “given to thee and to thy heirs” and later Alice tells Mosby “My saving husband hoards up bags of gold / To make our children rich.” Yet for all the interest that Franklin and Mosby have in Arden’s heirs, Arden himself seems relatively unconcerned with his own lineage. Despite Alice’s claim that his monetary ambitions aim to benefit his children, and despite Franklin’s mention that Arden’s land will pass on to his heirs, Arden himself says nothing explicitly about lineage or succession.

Arden’s lineage issues provide another parallel to the anxieties over monarchical succession that are consistently explored in other, more traditional history plays. The uncertainty of a kingdom, or a household, without a direct line of succession would have resonated with the theatergoers of the 1590s, as would Arden’s apparent avoidance of the problem. The endings of

36 Arden of Faversham, I.3.
37 Arden of Faversham, I.220-221. This piece of dialogue is notably ambiguous as to whether Alice means existing children of hers and Arden’s, potential children of hers and Arden’s, or potential children that she will have with Mosby. No children appear in the play, so it is usually assumed that she refers to possible future children. Legally, any children Alice might have while Arden is still alive would be Arden’s heirs, even if they were conceived by her and Mosby.
Richard III and Edward II both portray the crown passed down to the next monarch, one who, in both cases, we can assume will be a much better ruler than the king who was just overthrown. When Arden is eventually murdered by his wife, there is no one to take over the household. Even Greene, whose claim to the abbey lands in Faversham is superseded by a land grant for Arden in the beginning of the play, is forced to flee after becoming involved in Arden’s murder; therefore he cannot claim Arden’s land and restore order—as Henry VII restores order at the end of Richard III—by taking the household back from someone who would abuse it and restoring order through better rule. The epilogue at the end of the play concludes the story but does not provide an explanation as to the fate of Arden’s land after his death. Franklin’s final monologue is instead focused on the fate of all the characters. He says, “Thus have you seen the truth of Arden’s death.” He gives an account of the fates of Black Will, Shakebag, Greene, and Clark, then adds a peculiar and almost folkloric detail that “in the grass his body’s print was seen / Two years and more after the deed was done.” Finally, Franklin concludes:

Gentlemen, we hope you'll pardon this naked tragedy,
Wherein no fil’d points are foisted in
To make it gracious to the ear or eye;
For simple truth is gracious enough,
And needs no other points of glozing stuff.

Thus the play ends in a manner which suggests neither perfect restoration of order nor complete social upheaval. Justice is served, somewhat imperfectly; Arden is dead, his assets are presumably absorbed by the state because there are no heirs to claim them, and Franklin lives on to tell the tale of Arden’s murder.

38 Arden of Faversham, Epil.1.
39 Arden of Faversham, Epil.2-9.
41 Arden of Faversham, Epil.14-18.
The way he reflects on the story and the play is telling about how the play positions itself within the concept of history. Franklin’s claim of truth or “simple truth” is conventional, and does not necessarily denote historical accuracy, but it may suggest that the play is claiming some sort of “higher truth” than what other conveyances of the story can claim. This could be as much a comment on the theatrical genre as on the play itself, for instead of claiming historical accuracy (to which one might assume that Holinshed’s Chronicles have a stronger claim) the “truth” posited here could instead point to an affective or moral truth which resonates with the spectators. Franklin then calls the play a “naked tragedy,” which is both an assertion of the play's function as a tragedy (despite its middling characters) and a sort of humility topos which positions the tragedy in a seemingly lesser subgenre. But then, this very idea of a domestic tragedy (or history) being a lesser subgenre is immediately called into question when Franklin asserts that “simple truth is gracious enough, / And needs no other points of glosing stuff.” The staging of a story seems like exactly the sort of “glosing stuff” which the play’s epilogue claims to avoid, and we must therefore assume that the claims to nakedness and simplicity seek to compare it to other history plays or other historical narratives, rather than comparing it to the other tellings of Arden's murder. The idea that this is a simple play “wherein no fil’d points are foisted in / To make it gracious to the ear or eye” suggests that the play makes no intellectual pretenses nor attempts to make the play particularly poetic or artful, and rather seeks merely to tell a story. To a literary critic, this claim can seem extremely problematic, unless the “fil’d points” are equated with political, propagandic intellectualism. With its claim to be “simple
truth” without “fil’d points” or “glozing stuff,” the play could simply be positioning itself as concerned with a sociopolitical zeitgeist, rather than with any singular political or social ideal.42

The suggestion that this play is “simple” and “naked” when it is, of course, a complex and intellectually engaging piece suggests that the play seeks to compare itself to other works which contain “fil’d points” or “glozing stuff.” Whether the comparison is more to chronicle accounts or to plays which depict the affairs of aristocrats, it can be assumed that the “glozing stuff” which the play claims to eschew is related to the traditional aristocratic understanding of either “tragedy” or “history” or both. The notion of “glozing” could refer to intellectual explanation or interpretation, but it can also be used to refer to flattery.43 Franklin’s epilogue therefore claims that the play seeks neither to intellectually comment on, nor to make a particularly flattering depiction of any of its characters, nor to flatter or otherwise seek to “please” the play’s audience. Instead the play makes a claim to “naked” and “simple truth.” This claim speaks to the “simple” nature of the middling folk of the playhouses and their own sensibilities which would be seen by many as lacking “fil’d points” and “glozing stuff,” especially, as was so often the case even in the most political plays, when a play aimed to explore the issues they presented rather than take a particular stance and propagandize it.

*Arden of Faversham* is certainly concerned with historical political events which would have resonated with the theatergoing populace in the 1590s. But the themes in *Arden of Faversham* are, as I suggested previously, not propagandic or didactic but instead focus on topical issues and explores them in ways that speak to the anxieties of the day rather than an

42 See Brian Walsh, *Shakespeare, the Queen’s Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17 for an argument of how most Elizabethan history plays function in this way, rather than as propaganda pieces.
obvious stance on or solution to these issues. The scholars I mentioned previously in this chapter have all written about *Arden of Faversham*’s treatment of various sociopolitical issues which were on the minds of English people in the 1590s, especially those of middling status, and the complicated treatment which the play gives to all of these issues. Inheritance, divorce, rule and overthrow, are all themes in *Arden of Faversham* which directly parallel issues of state, and for that reason they are all interesting in the context of reading *Arden of Faversham* as a history play. But it should not be forgotten that *Arden of Faversham* is not just a middling parallel for important issues of state. It is also an important piece of sixteenth century social history, and through its exploration of middling socioeconomics, it provides us with important insight into the middling people’s history in the early modern period. The economic shifts under Henry VIII which allowed for previously unknown opportunities for upward social and economic mobility among the middling folk and led indirectly to the surge of public playhouses, are also a catalyst for Arden’s acquisition of land and consequently his murder. The play depicts new opportunities for the middling class, and also serves as a cautionary tale to some who might take advantage of them. Still, the play does not seem condemning of upward mobility itself; rather Arden’s inability to properly manage his household and his carelessness in seizing land and money lead to his downfall.

Throughout *Arden of Faversham*, language of class, money, and social status are pervasive. This is true even when romantic relationships are discussed. Mosby and Alice, in their lover’s banter and their quarrels, turn to language of status and money. When Mosby and Alice quarrel in the first scene, Alice calls him “base peasant” and asks him:

*What hast thou to countenance my love, Being descended from a noble house,*

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44 *Arden of Faversham*, I.198.
And matched already with a gentleman
Whose servant thou mayest be?\textsuperscript{45}

Her inclination is to claim her status over Mosby, which is indeed higher than his own. But it seems that Mosby does quite well monetarily, and his lower status does not keep him from seeking wealth. In scene 8, they quarrel again and Mosby tells Alice:

\begin{verbatim}
I left the marriage of an honest maid
Whose dowry would have weighed down all thy wealth
And wrapped my credit in thy company\textsuperscript{46}
\end{verbatim}

Mosby is clearly concerned with how his romantic affairs may service his wealth, and it is interesting how Alice claims high social status, whereas Mosby turns to monetary language. He even speaks of Alice herself as though she is a trinket or some other faux valuable: “Now the rain has beaten off thy gilt / Thy worthless copper shows the counterfeit.”\textsuperscript{47} In the same scene, when Alice attempts to pacify her lover, she again returns to language of status:

\begin{verbatim}
Sweet Mosby is as gentle as a king,
So whatso’er my Mosby’s father was,
Himself is valued gentle by his worth.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{verbatim}

The socioeconomic impasse between the two lovers is apparent in the way they speak of one another. Alice is quick to assert her social status over Mosby, but Mosby has enough wealth to counter her assertions of status with arguments of his own monetary value.

\textit{Arden of Faversham} is extremely conscious of the fluidity of money, status, and property that middling people in the sixteenth century experienced, even when its characters fail to be cognizant of this fluidity and its consequences. In fact, the problems faced by most of the

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Arden of Faversham}, I.201-204.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Arden of Faversham}, VIII.88-92.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Arden of Faversham}, VIII.100-101.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Arden of Faversham}, VIII.140-145.
characters seem to stem not from socioeconomic fluidity but rather their inability to adequately contend with that fluidity. Catherine Richardson suggests that the foremost concerns explored in *Arden of Faversham* are the monetary and domestic concerns, especially Arden’s mismanagement of his household and his property.\(^\text{49}\) The very first scene of the play begins with Franklin talking to Arden about the newly deeded lands which Arden has acquired.\(^\text{50}\) But Arden takes no joy in his newfound prosperity because he is instead lamenting that his wife is unfaithful.\(^\text{51}\) Richardson writes of the play’s beginning, “The opening exchange economically sets up the play’s main preoccupations. It introduces Arden’s significant status and pairs it with his domestic incompetence, and it locates both issues within the topography of Faversham.”\(^\text{52}\)

The same interest in the bifurcated sources of social and economic status underlies *Richard III* and *Edward II*, but in *Arden of Faversham* it becomes one of the main driving forces. Because of the socioeconomic mobility and fluidity of the middling classes in the sixteenth century, *Arden of Faversham* is able to give a much more overt idea of the ways that players, playwrights, and many theater spectators thought about money and status, and even the ways that these two elements could come into conflict. The idea of status by birthright, which is explored so thoroughly in *Edward II* and *Richard III*, is again seen in *Arden of Faversham* with regard to Arden’s status as a gentleman. But this status, even though it is Arden’s birthright, is not as straightforward as Edward II or even Richard III’s claim to the throne, and Arden’s place in his own society hinges as much on money as it does on birthright.

Arden is quick to criticize Mosby for his upward social ambition. Arden claims that Mosby has been immoral in his upward ambitions by attaining them through shady business

\(^{49}\) Richardson, *Domestic Life*, 105-106.

\(^{50}\) *Arden of Faversham*, I.1-8.

\(^{51}\) *Arden of Faversham*, I.15-19.

\(^{52}\) Richardson, *Domestic Life*, 105.
dealings and social manipulation. Arden condemns Mosby for underhandedly achieving a status which is above his birthright, calling Mosby:

A botcher, and no better at the first,
Who, by base brokage getting some small stock,
Crept into service of a nobleman,
And by his servile flattery and fawning
Is now become the steward of his house.

Yet Arden is guilty of similar ambitions in his own monetary affairs. Arden is a gentleman by birthright, as he himself is quick to bring up as he denounces Mosby. But his monetary ambitions are less clearly deserved, for Greene claims that Arden “doth me wrong / To wring me from the little land I have” Arden’s lands came to him legally by royal patent, but the circumstances surrounding Arden’s land acquisition suggest that he was opportunistic and perhaps underhanded in his dealings.

It is made clear in the play that Arden’s status and his land come from monastery land dissolved under Henry VIII. The events which unfold in Arden of Faversham are possible only because of social and economic shifts which caused an expanse of the middling class and increased opportunities for upward social mobility. The land which Arden obtains and the economic opportunities provided by those lands are not Arden’s birthright, but rather something he is “freely given” at the beginning of the play. Arden’s acquisition of dissolved abbey lands are what cause Greene’s anger toward Arden, giving Alice leverage to convince Greene to assist in Arden’s murder. It is understood that Greene had some claim to the abbey lands in Faversham before they were deeded to Arden; Greene therefore holds the same economic concerns as Arden, rooted in a more traditional economic model. Greene’s profession is never stated, but he

53 Arden of Faversham, I.25-29.
54 Arden of Faversham, I.36.
55 Arden of Faversham, I.470-471.
is called “Master Greene” by Alice which suggests that he is of respectable status (not a servant) but not so high in status as to be otherwise titled. We can assume that Greene holds a similar status as Arden’s, but Arden proves more successful in his economic affairs by taking advantage of new economic opportunities.

Competition for money and status among gentlemen and servants is a central theme in *Arden of Faversham* which pits common people against one another the same way that matters of state pit aristocrats against one another in the history plays like *Edward II* and *Richard III*. Attempts to assert status over money, or use money in place of status, are among the main issues which lead to conflict between the main characters. Alice’s romantic entanglements, which are focused on more explicitly, may in fact be a less powerful driving force for animosity among the main male characters. The socioeconomic issues of the larger populace are, of course, either directly or indirectly matters of state, but these clashes between status and money among the middling classes are much less apparent in plays about the aristocracy. That said, *Edward II* is very concerned with the abuse of both money and status in Edward’s relationship with Gaveston. Richard in *Richard III* likewise uses his social status as well as his advantageous relationships (familial, romantic, and otherwise) in his attempts to take the throne. What *Arden of Faversham* offers that monarchical history plays do not, is a middling focus through which to view these ideas. *Arden of Faversham* is concerned with the same larger sociopolitical concepts that *Edward II* and *Richard III* explore, but in *Arden of Faversham* they are explored in ways that speak to the middling Englishman’s experience, and by that merit would likely have resonated more with the majority of early modern theatergoers.

The same competition for money and status among the middling folk which drives the action in *Arden of Faversham* was the driving force behind the booming market of commercial
theater. The same opportunities for socioeconomic mobility portrayed in *Arden of Faversham* drove writers and poets to work in the theaters. The same opportunities for land acquisition in the wake of Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries which begin *Arden of Faversham* also began the commercial theater industry in London. The first playhouse, as discussed in chapter 1, was built on the land of a former priory in Halliwell.56 *Arden of Faversham* is therefore indicative of the same culture which allowed commercial playhouses to flourish, and allowed for playwrights like Shakespeare and Marlowe to make their living by writing for the stage. *Arden of Faversham* depicts the expanding and mobile middling class to which the great playwrights of the era largely belonged, and to whom the public theaters owed a healthy percentage of their patronage. *Arden of Faversham* therefore deserves its place in the canon of history plays not only because of its depiction of “social history” but because of its involvement in those same social movements which allowed the playhouses to flourish and allowed the entire history play genre to exist.

The long tradition of reading *Arden of Faversham* as a domestic tragedy has too often relegated it to a “marginal” or “vulgar” place in historiography. And while some scholars have made the point that *Arden of Faversham* is connected to matters of state and is therefore owed its place in the broader concept of “historiography,” many of the scholars who argue this still feel the need to make qualifications, move *Arden of Faversham* into marginalized sub-categories of history, or otherwise downplay the play’s place in historiography on the grounds that it is, as Holinshed once claimed, a “private matter.” But because the early modern stage had such an immense influence and effect on history, it is vital that we understand the role of middling people in that history. *Arden of Faversham* serves as a window into that history—a history that should not be marginalized.

Bibliography


