

Articles

Home-Rebels and House-Traitors: Murderous Wives in Early Modern England

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In Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* (1612), which contributes to the lively debate over the theater in Renaissance England, two murderous wives make cameo appearances. Against claims that the theater displays and corrupts women, Heywood argues that the theater is instead an arena in which criminal women can be found out and controlled. For Heywood, to imagine women as theatergoers and spectators is to imagine them as adulterous and murderous wives, waiting to be discovered. Arguing that plays are not only morally instructive, but have been "the discoverers of many notorious murders," Heywood offers two "domestike and home-borne" examples of the "education" of murderous wives.

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In one, for instance, a woman who sees an unusual murder enacted on stage—a nail driven through the victim's skull—confesses to killing her husband in a similar way. As Heywood remarks approvingly: "This being publickly confest, she was arraigned, condemned, adjudged, and burned."¹ In defending the theater as a means of, rather than an obstacle to, social control, Heywood employs the figure of the murderous wife as a representative of the social disorder that the theater can suppress by exposing. In his narrative, women are spectators and spectacles, agents of violent action and objects of control, murderers and wives. In this essay, I am interested in the cultural conditions peculiar to early modern England that enabled writers like Heywood to use the figure of the murderous wife as the embodiment of such irreconcilable contradictions.

I. DEFINING PETTY TREASON: LEGAL AND POPULAR FICTIONS

The murderous wife invited representation and debate in a huge array of seventeenth-century printed texts, including legal treatises, pamphlets, scaffold speeches, ballads, and plays. Depicting actual domestic crimes, these texts serve a variety of functions—spreading news, correcting false reports with "true relations," offering moral lessons and "warnings," debating legal issues, and fulfilling the taste of a burgeoning audience for titillation and retribution.² Although these texts offer varying accounts of the extent and nature of the contradictions inherent in the story of the murderous wife, all of them, I will argue, constitute a wife's subjectivity as violent in itself. Obviously, accounts of women who kill their husbands represent the protagonists as the agents of violent action. But in my analysis I locate subjectivity in interiority and speech as well as in action: "the constitution of the social subject depends on the nexus language/subjectivity/consciousness."³ Similarly, the violence to which I

1. Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors* (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Rpt., 1966), 57, 60. Catherine Belsey also connects Heywood's *Apology* to representations of petty treason; see her *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985).

2. On how literary convention shapes documents about crime, see Natalie Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1987); Lincoln B. Faller, *Turned to Account: The Forms and Functions of Criminal Biography in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987); J. A. Sharpe, "'Last Dying Speeches': Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past and Present* 107 (May 1985): 144-67; and Lacey Baldwin Smith, "English Treason Trials and Confessions in the Sixteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* XV (1954): 471-98.

3. Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," *Feminist Studies* 16.1 (1990), 115. My use of the term "subject" has also been informed by: Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-86; Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*; Louis A. Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History," *English Literary Renaissance* 16.1 (1986): 5-12; Carol Thomas Neely, "Constructing the Subject: Feminist Practice and the New Renaissance Discourses," *English Literary Renaissance* 18.1 (1988): 5-18; Judith Lowder Newton, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism' " in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York: Routledge, 1989):

refer includes both actual acts of murder and transgressions at the conceptual and ideological level.

By asserting her entitlement to grievance and "self-will," and endeavoring to reshape her circumstances by means of violence, the murderous wife calls into question the legal conception of a wife as subsumed by her husband and largely incapable of legal or moral agency. She also violates the vigorous and persistent, if not necessarily descriptive, cultural constructions of women as incapable of initiative or autonomous action. The heterogeneous narratives of the murderous wife construct the conditions of wifely subjectivity as criminal, because, through violent action, the contradictions of wives' social and legal status erupt as uncontrollable.

The legal and literary attempts to represent married women's self-assertion link it with the violence to which it leads. These texts represent married women's consciousness of their conflict with and separateness from their husbands, their articulation of themselves as speaking subjects, and their plotting and execution of murder as interrelated and as equally violent. They also represent the subjectivities of their protagonists as produced both by their subordination to the hierarchies ordering gender, class, and domestic relations (they are wives) and by their resistance to them (they are *murderous* wives).

In *The Crowne Conjugall*, John Wing reminds readers that "an *undutifull wife* is a *home-rebell*, a *house-traitor*." Wing's hyphenated terms reveal the conflation of the domestic and political, the ways that cultural ideas about order and disorder can be shaped and articulated through the representation of the home.⁴ In early modern England, this analogy between the domestic and the political shaped both literary and legal representation; the possibility that a wife might actually kill her husband was so disturbing that the crime had a special legal status. In legal statutes, beginning in 1352, killing one's husband, defined as petty treason, was carefully distinguished from other forms of murder and announced as analogous to high treason—any threat to or assault on the monarch and his or her government. While a man who killed his wife or servant

152-67; Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 773-97; and Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988).

4. John Wing, *The Crowne Conjugall* (London, 1632), 297. On the analogy between the household and commonwealth, see: Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, esp. 144-48; Dymrna Callaghan, *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy: A Study of King Lear, Othello, The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1989), 14-27; Natalie Z. Davis, "Women on Top" in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1975), esp. 127-28; Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1967), chapter 13; Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), chapter 2; Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), chapter 3; and Mary Lyndon Shanley, "Marriage Contract and Social Contract in Seventeenth Century English Political Thought," *Western Political Quarterly* XXXII.1 (1979): 79-91.

was accused of murder, "if any servant kill his Master, any woman kill her husband, or any secular or religious person kill his Prelate to whom he owes Obedience, this is treason" (25 Ed. III, St. 5, cap. 2). As one justice of the peace succinctly explained, the reason that a murderous wife committed petty treason while a murderous husband committed murder "is for that the one is in subiection and oweth obedience, and not the other."⁵ Just as high treason was defined and punished as a particularly heinous crime against the political and social order, the crime of petty treason endowed the domestic offense of murdering one's husband or master with public, political significance and distinguished the offender from other felons by a somewhat modified version of the traitor's death. Until 1790, gender determined punishment for high and petty treason. Men adjudged of high treason were hanged, then their genitals were severed and burned before them; finally, they were disembowelled, decapitated, and quartered. Men adjudged of petty treason were drawn to the place of execution on a hurdle, then hanged. In contrast, for both high and petty treason women were burned at the stake.⁶ In the case of female offenders, then, judgments suggested that high and petty treason were not only analogous crimes, but that they were virtually indistinguishable.

The transgressions of curates against their ministers and male servants against their masters inscribed in the legal definition of petty treason offer a useful reminder that domestic hierarchy and gender hierarchy are not the same thing, and that gender and class categories do not neatly map onto one another. Some discussions of petty treason, although not the legal statutes themselves, suggest that a female servant who kills her mistress or a child who kills his or her mother could be considered guilty of petty treason. Such texts thus grant women positions of authority analogous to those of the king or queen—or husband or master—and present crimes against them, in their roles as mothers and mistresses, as crimes against familial and domestic authority. Although it was possible for female gender to coincide with domestic authority, as the relatively frequent murders of women by their servants and children confirm,⁷ these stories are seldom told in the popular texts that survive to us, nor is this possibility explicitly addressed in the Statute of Treasons. When

5. Michael Dalton, *The Countrey Justice* (London, 1618), 205.

6. On punishments, see J. H. Baker, "Criminal Courts and Procedure in Common Law 1550-1800" in *Crime in England, 1550-1800*, ed. J. S. Cockburn (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), 42. For the Statute of Treasons (25 Edward III, St. 5, cap. 2), see William Rastall, *A Collection in English of the Statutes Now in Force* (London, 1603), 460.b.

7. For discussions of whether killing a mistress was petty treason, see Dalton, *The Countrey Justice*, 204-06; T. E., *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights: or, the Lawes Provision for Woemen*, compiled by I. L., and revised by T. E. (London, 1632), sigs. O8v-P; and Ferdinando Pulton, *De Pace Regis et Regni* (London, 1623), sigs. T6v-U. For accounts of female servants who kill or attempt to kill their mistresses, see the story of Joane Burs in Henry Goodcole, *Natures Cruell Step-Dames* (London, 1637) and Thomas Brewer, *The Bloudy Mother* (London, 1609).

petty treason is written about, it is inevitably as the story of the murderous wife (and, often, of her servant-lover); when a woman is granted an important role in a story of domestic violence, she is usually the perpetrator rather than the victim of that violence. The complexities with which the justices of the peace wrestled are excluded from the many popular versions of the story of the betrayed male authority figure and the female home-rebel and house-traitor.

While most scholars have focused on the political implications of the commonplace analogy between household and commonwealth which informs the legal definition of petty treason, I think that accounts of petty treason draw attention to the *domestic* implications of this analogy and the pressure it places on the household and its members. Although the legal definition of petty treason constructs the subordination of wives and servants to the master of the household as the foundation of domestic and civil order, as natural and inevitable, it also acknowledges that wives and servants did not always cooperate. Thus their subordination was *not* a given. The very need to define such a crime, and the fairly regular opportunities to see or read about the offenders who committed it, suggest the pervasive fear that wives and servants could and would rebel; they might not acquiesce to their subordination, which was achieved by a complex network of constraints and coercions, a network that could break down. The statute thus tells two stories that contradict one another: "these are the incontrovertible, non-negotiable principles according to which our world works"; and, simultaneously, "our world does not always work according to these principles, so perhaps they are controvertible and negotiable."

Legal and literary discussions of the murderous wife and her crime, petty treason, then, explored the contradictory, disturbing nature of wifely subjectivity in its most extreme and uncontainable form. But it is there—in those moments of violent criminality—that prescription constituted married women as subjects. As numerous scholars have noted, in early modern England, husband and wife became one legal agent—the husband—by means of the husband's "subsumption" of his wife into himself.⁸ In this process, the wife became a "feme covert," meaning that she was "veiled, as it were, clouded and over-shadowed." The wife emerged from this coverture when her husband ("her *sterne*, her *primus motor*, without whom she cannot doe much at home, and lesse abroad") died or deserted her, or when she committed a serious crime independently: "In matters criminall and capitall causes, a Feme covert shall answere without her husband."⁹ As Catherine Belsey succinctly explains, "women became capable while and only while they had no hus-

8. See Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age—Further Explored*, 3rd ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1984), 20.

9. T. E., *Lawes Resolutions*, sigs. I7, O6v, and O7v.

bands, but were always accountable."¹⁰ In legal theory, married women, although "covert" and subsumed, were held accountable for their actions when they committed felonies.

In *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights* (1632), an encyclopedia written to inform women about their legal rights, T. E. explains that the husband's incorporation of his wife into himself is the reason "that Women have no voyse in Parliament, They make no Lawes, they consent to none, they abrogate none. All of them are understood either married or to bee married and their desires [are] subject to their husband, I know no remedy though some women can shift it well enough."¹¹ T. E. simultaneously constitutes wives as subjects of desire and, in that very desire, as subject to their husbands. In pursuing their desire, married women are represented as "shifting it," as maneuvering *within* a subjection presented as repressive, by bending, if not breaking, the rules.¹² Thus, married women are "covert" both in that they are subsumed by their husbands and in that they are stealthy, sly maneuverers within that subsumption. It is only in infractions, in T. E.'s text presented as shifting rather than transgressing, that subjectivity is conferred on married women, even when they are not criminal or violent. By this formulation, T. E. constitutes married women as subjects, but never challenges the sexual ideologies within which they must operate. If, by presenting wives as "shifting it," T. E. constructs them as subjects without fracturing marriage, or reshaping their legal status, he also describes a strategy that only works if it doesn't draw attention to itself. Those women who abandoned the covert tactic of "shifting it" in favor of violence, and thereby challenged the subordinate place allotted them in the institution of marriage and in legal discourse, did draw attention to themselves, from neighbors, magistrates, and justices of the peace, and from writers. Their tactics were conceptually allied with the acceptable strategy of "shifting it," yet, because they were less *covert* in either meaning of that word, these wives gained more attention—and more censure.

Both the legal definition of petty treason and T. E.'s reflections on married women's legal status and their strategies for coping with it demonstrate the interrelation of legal and popular fictions in early modern England. Both kinds of fictions contribute to and attempt to evade the historically particular contradictions of married women's legal status. Recently, numerous scholars have emphasized the disparity between prescription and practice concerning women's status and marital relations in early modern England.¹³ Scholars such as Mary Beth Rose have also

10. Belsey, *Subject of Tragedy*, 153.

11. T. E., *Lawes Resolutions*, sig. B3v.

12. On how Tudor women "shifted it" in regard to property, see Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum* (London, 1583), sig. O3v, and Pearl Hogrefe, "Legal Rights of Tudor Women and the Circumvention by Men and Women," *Sixteenth Century Journal* III.1 (1972): 97-105.

13. See Amussen, *Ordered Society*, 92-93; Ralph A. Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450-1700*

demonstrated the contradictions and tensions *within* prescriptive discourses about love, sexuality, and marriage. In these discourses, wives were constructed as authorities and dependents, partners and subordinates, sometimes allied with their husbands and sometimes with the children and servants.¹⁴ Just as there were contradictions inherent in the cultural construction of the role of wife, the lived experience of many married women may also have contradicted the prescriptions for and representations of their conduct.

Both legal theory and popular representation participated in the paradoxical process of constituting married women as subjects; they also informed but did not reflect legal practice. For instance, in her assessment of assize indictments that describe defendants as married spinsters, Carol Wiener argues that the married spinster was "a useful legal fiction" invented by judges in response to the contradictions of married women's legal status.¹⁵ Wiener's discovery of the fiction of the married spinster demonstrates the centrality of fictions to the maintenance of social order, and the ways these fictions can simultaneously make contradictions visible and work to occlude them; the "useful legal fiction" of the married spinster permitted the prosecution of married women for crimes. Yet although these fictions did have consequences and did inform practice, my focus in this article is on *representations* in popular literature and in legal theory. While the legal definition of petty treason was not new to the early modern period and, as we will see, the crime did not actually increase in this period, the representation of petty treason was a phenomenon particular to the late Tudor and Stuart periods.

The proliferation of texts about petty treason does not demonstrate that wives and servants suddenly began killing their husbands and masters in record numbers. Nor does the relative paucity of texts on husbands killing their wives (especially before 1650) mean that they rarely did so, or more important, that they did so less frequently than wives killed their husbands. Indeed, statistics on domestic homicide in this period suggest that husbands murdered their wives at least twice as often as wives murdered their husbands. Using assize indictments from Essex, Hertfordshire, and Sussex, 1559-1625, J. S. Cockburn calculates that

(London: Longman, 1984), 112-13; Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), 192-93; and Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1982), 92.

14. See Amussen, *Ordered Society*, esp. 41-47 and 72-85; Belsey, *Subject of Tragedy*, chapter 6; Lynda E. Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.2 (1991): 179-213, esp. 194; Margaret J. M. Ezell, *The Patriarch's Wife: Literary Evidence and the History of the Family* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1987), chapter 2; Rosemary Kegl, "'Those Terrible Approches': Sexuality, Social Mobility, and Resisting the Courtliness of Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*," *English Literary Renaissance* 20.2 (1990): 191-92; Rose, *Expense of Spirit*, esp. 127-29; and Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 195-202.

15. Carol Z. Wiener, "Is a Spinster an Unmarried Woman?," *American Journal of Legal History* 20.1 (1976): 30.

women were the victims of almost three-fourths of the instances of "marital killing." In Essex assizes from 1560-1709, J. A. Sharpe finds that women outnumber men as the victims of spousal murders two to one. Servants, too, were more often the victims than the perpetrators of violence.¹⁶ Although women and servants rarely committed acts of violence, the story of the murderous wife or the murderous servant is far more frequently narrated and published than the story of the murderous husband or master. The process of textual representation thus amplifies rather than suppresses women's violent assertions of self, revealing and contributing to an anxiety about murderous wives in inverse proportion to the actual threat that they posed.

Although relatively few women actually murdered their husbands, those who did unleashed fears that the home was not safe and could not be protected against those who would rise against it from within. If surviving court records suggest that murderous men generally killed other men who were not members of their households, and did so in public places, they also suggest that murderous women most often killed their family members at home.¹⁷ The texts about petty treason dwell on the violation of domesticity and marital intimacy that this crime, which generally occurred in the central locations of marital life—the dining table and the bed—entailed. The formulation of legal separation as a divorce *a mensa et thoro*, from table and bed, reinforces the significance of these furnishings as sites of intimacy and estrangement.¹⁸ Most accounts of petty treason present the transgressors as acting on these sites. Mistress Page of Plymouth and her lover, George Strangwidge, after strangling her husband with his own kerchief and breaking his neck against the bedside, "stretched him and laid him in his bed again . . . as though no such act had been attempted."¹⁹ Lowe, a curate, smothers Leonard James, the minister under whom he serves and whose wife he has seduced, in his own bed; despite admonitory thunder and lightning, "like

16. J. S. Cockburn, "The Nature and Incidence of Crime in England 1559-1625: A Preliminary Survey" in *Crime in England, 1550-1800*, ed. Cockburn (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), 57; J. A. Sharpe, "Domestic Homicide in Early Modern England," *The Historical Journal* 24.1 (1981): 36-38. See also Susan Dwyer Amussen, "'Being Stirred to Much Unquietness': Violence and Domestic Violence in Early Modern England," unpublished essay; I am grateful to Dr. Amussen for sharing her work with me in draft. On patterns of interpersonal violence in England, see J. S. Cockburn, "Patterns of Violence in English Society: Homicide in Kent 1560-1985," *Past and Present* 130 (Feb. 1991): 70-106; J. A. Sharpe, "The History of Violence in England: Some Observations," *Past and Present* 108 (Aug. 1985): 206-15; and Lawrence Stone, "Interpersonal Violence in English Society 1300-1980," *Past and Present* 101 (Nov. 1983): 22-33.

17. Sharpe, "Domestic Homicide," 36-37.

18. Either husband or wife could seek such a divorce, which did not free either spouse to remarry, by petitioning to the ecclesiastical courts, claiming adultery or physical cruelty. See Amussen, "Violence and Domestic Violence," and Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), esp. chapter 5.

19. "The Murder of Page of Plymouth," from *Sundry Strange and Inhumane Murders, Lately Committed* (1591), rpt. in *Blood and Knavery: A Collection of English Renaissance Pamphlets and Ballads of Crime and Sin*, ed. Joseph H. Marshburn and Alan R. Velie (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1973), 62.

a bestyall savage . . . hee layd vyolent and bloody hands upon the body of his sleeping Master."²⁰

In administering poison—the early modern housewife's method of choice, perhaps because it is a tidy, non-confrontational method that relies more on cunning than on physical strength—wives are presented as manipulating their husbands' dependence on them for physical sustenance.²¹ Anne Hamton so heavily laces her husband's food with poison, "enough to have destroyed ten men," that he swells and bursts; Anne Welles fixes her husband "a measse of suger soppes" laced with "a strong deadly poyson"; Elizabeth Caldwell gives her husband poisoned "oaten cakes . . . for that she knewe [he] much affected them."²² In these violations of domesticity, vividly figured through disrupted sleep and contaminated food, the dependent who should share the bed and table, solace and nurture her husband's body, abuses intimacy to invade and destroy that body.

Such representations of the violated home both reinforce the household as the sphere in which women act, and suggest that women were not only confined to the household but empowered within it. At home, they suffer frustrations and annoyances so great that they turn to violence, but at home they also dare to lash out and to transform their household tasks into the occasions of retribution, and their household tools into the weapons they need. By depicting the home as an arena of female power as well as subordination, and by representing the feme covert as both subsumed by her husband and stealthily insubordinate, accounts of petty treason show how the analogy between the household and commonwealth could work to grant the household significance as a locus of conflict, in which even the most mundane tasks could participate in shaping and articulating cultural ideas of order and disorder. Many Puritan writers insisted that marriage "constitutes the arena in which the individual can struggle and meet death or defeat, triumph or salvation."²³ The discourses of petty treason similarly construct both marriage and the household as arenas of contest and striving, but refuse the concept of shared heroism that the Protestant discourses of marriage attempt to idealize

20. *A True Relation of the Most Inhumane and Bloody Murther, of Master James . . . Committed By One Lowe His Curate, and Consented Unto By His Wife* (London, 1609), sigs. A4v-B.

21. In his work with assize court record, Cockburn also finds that murderous wives are associated with stealth and poison ("Nature and Incidence," 57).

22. *Murther, Murther. Or, A Bloody Relation How Anne Hamton . . . By Poyson Murthered Her Deare Husband* (London, 1641), rpt. in *Miscellanea Antiqua Anglicana: The Old Book Collectors Miscellany*, ed. Charles Hindley (London: Reeves and Turner, 1872), 2.4-5; *The Trueth of the Most Wicked and Secret Murthering of John Brewen . . . Committed By His Owne Wife* (London, 1592), rpt. in *Illustrations of Early English Popular Literature*, ed. J. Payne Collier (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), 1.9; Gilbert Dugdale, *A True Discourse of the Practises of Elizabeth Caldwell . . . on the Person of Ma: Thomas Caldwell . . . to Have Murdered and Poysoned Him* (London, 1604), sig. B.

23. Rose, *Expense of Spirit*, 121.

and disseminate, suggesting instead that there can be only one winner—indeed, only one survivor.

II. STRATEGIES FOR NARRATING THE UNSPEAKABLE: THE BATTERED WIFE AND THE ECONOMY OF MARITAL SUBJECTIVITY

While texts about petty treason are clear in their depiction of where and how women murder their husbands, they have more trouble explaining *why* women do so. Just as the murderous wife challenged the conceptions of women's legal and moral stature on which marriage and social order depended, she also posed a problem for the many writers—hacks, ministers, legal personnel (such as judges, justices of the peace, clerks, and theorists), chroniclers, playwrights, and balladeers—who rushed to tell and sell her story. These authors attempt to tell a story in which a wife is a protagonist, without conferring too much authority, prestige, or sympathy on criminal, married women. Only through transgression could such women, usually wives of yeomen, shopkeepers, tradesmen, and small landowners, demand attention outside of the household and neighborhood;²⁴ only through transgression could they become the topic of debate in legal treatises and on streetcorners, the focus of attention in courtrooms and on scaffolds; only through transgression could they command a place at the center of a popular narrative as the protagonist of the story.²⁵

But if killing her husband could make it possible for a wife to be at the center of a story, it remained a difficult story to tell. Certainly pamphlets describe who did what to whom with ease. Yet although the wife commands representation as a subject only through violence, the texts that struggle to tell the story of her transgression attempt to redress it through a didacticism that restricts the narration of her motives and desires. Once the writers begin to explore motives, they lose control of the moral of the story, for the more the reader engages with the wife, the less simple the lesson becomes. To imagine, let alone sympathize or identify with, the frustrations of a wife is to question the legal and moral assumption that in the household there is only one citizen, one legal agent, one property owner, one decision maker and actor: the husband.

Some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts employ the explanation

24. Among the cases that I have examined, husbands' occupations include locksmith, goldsmith, farmer, inn keeper, hatter, and turner. I have also encountered murderous wives with their own occupations outside of the home, midwifery and nursing.

25. On the prospects for women as protagonists and authority figures in early modern England, see: Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), chapter 6; Frances E. Dolan, "'Gentlemen, I Have One Thing More To Say': Women on Scaffolds in England, 1563-1680," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, forthcoming; Margaret Doody, "'Those Eyes Are Made So Killing': Eighteenth-Century Murderesses and the Law," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* XLVI.1 (1984): 49-80; Rackin, *Stages of History*, 147-48 and 161-62; and Rose, *Expense of Spirit*, chapter 3.

of motive that we most often see in our own culture's representations of murderous wives, in the news and in popular culture, by representing the murderer as a battered wife who resorts to violence in despair and self-defense. Such texts present women's violence as a reaction to the violence inflicted on them by men. Contrary to reductive analyses of the early modern family, and the position of women in it, these texts suggest that husbands sometimes beat their wives to an extent that exceeded lawful correction and prudence, and that beatings put wives in "a fit humour for the devill to worke on." Alice Clarke, for instance, is described as having visible bruises at the time that she is apprehended and examined for killing her husband. Even the minister who counsels her and writes the gruesomely titled *Adulteresses Funerall Day* about her case, sees a connection between those bruises and her actions. The beatings described in such texts include not only drunken and impulsive assaults "with the next cudgell that came accidentally unto his hand," but also sadistic, eroticized rituals, such as "tying her to his bed-post to strip her and whippe her, &c."²⁶ Although pamphlets exploit the titillation of such stories, despite the coy propriety of that "etc.," they also suggest that husbands could be uncontrolled, savage, and "unnatural," and that wives, especially those isolated from friends and neighbors by shame, distance, and religious or ethnic difference, might have felt that violence was their only recourse.²⁷

At common law, husbands had a legal right to beat their wives; however, the limits on this right were debated in conduct literature and explored in ecclesiastical courts when members of the community feared that excessive beatings threatened the wife's life and the peace of the neighborhood. The law did not spell out the limits on discipline, except to assume that husbands did not have the right to kill their wives: "Domestic relations were thus on the borders of public and private morality in this period—matters to be influenced by exhortation but not ordinarily by the exercise of formal discipline."²⁸ To say that domestic relations remained outside of "formal" discipline is not to say that they were unobserved or unregulated; neighbors and the local community exerted informal control over marriage and domesticity in many ways, including confrontation, shaming rituals, and bringing the offending couple before the justice of the peace for "unquietness." But, while the husband's authority over his wife was scrutinized and constrained by the community, that authority remained legally and morally ambiguous.

26. Henry Goodcole, *The Adulteresses Funerall Day: In Flaming, Scorching, and Consuming Fire; Or the Burning Downe to Ashes of Alice Clarke . . . for the Unnaturall Poisoning of Fortune Clarke Her Husband* (London, 1635), sigs. B2v and Bv.

27. Amussen, *Ordered Society*, 128-29 and 167-68, and "Violence and Domestic Violence."

28. Ingram, *Church Courts*, 142; Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), 249, 286-97; and Sharpe, "Domestic Homicide," 31.

Since a husband's treatment of his wife remained largely outside of legal regulation, conduct literature appealed to the husband's judgment, urging him to regulate himself. In one of the many discussions of wife-beating in conduct literature, William Gouge suggests that beating one's wife undermines household governance because it opens up a space between the husband and wife, revealing that they are not one flesh, not one legal agent, but two: "now a wife having no ground to be perswaded that her husband hath authority to beat her, what hope is there that she will patiently beare it, and be bettered by it? Or rather is it not likely that she will if she can, rise against him, over-master him (as many do) and never doe any duty aright?"²⁹ The husband's violence threatens to incite a contest for mastery; once the context of violence enables the wife to enter the fray as a combatant, the outcome is uncertain.

One account of a wife's reaction to a marital rape—which we might not expect to find recognized as an offense in this period—clearly shows how a wife's subjectivity is constructed as violent, as a choice of her own life over her husband's life. In her examination recorded in *A Hellish Murder*, Mary Aubrey (or Hobry), a French midwife, describes a history of dissension which arose with her husband because she would not cooperate with him "in Villanies contrary to Nature." On the night of the murder, after beating her savagely, "... he attempted the Forcing of this Examine to the most Unnatural of Villanies, and acted such a Violence upon her Body in despite of all the Opposition that she could make, as forc'd from her a great deal of Blood, this Examine crying out to her Landlady, who was (as she believes) out of distance of hearing her."³⁰ When she insists that she cried out, Aubrey employs the strategy of the rape victim, who had to demonstrate that she had made a "hue and cry" and thus had not consented; hence, Aubrey also equates her husband's assault on her with a rape.³¹

In presenting Aubrey's compelling testimony about this assault, *A Hellish Murder* not only suggests that there are limits to a husband's rights to and power over his wife's body, but also constructs a subjectivity for Mary Aubrey out of her despair, sense of grievance, and determination to escape. Aubrey finally demands of her husband, "Am I to lead this Life for ever?", only to receive more threats in response. In asking that question, Mary Aubrey is presented as raising a voice, imagining herself as having a life separate from and in conflict with her husband's. By depicting her reaction to abuse and her contemplation of retaliatory violence, this text constitutes Aubrey as a self-conscious, speaking sub-

29. William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1622), 396-97. I am grateful to Susan Amussen for bringing this passage to my attention.

30. *A Hellish Murder Committed By a French Midwife, on the Body of Her Husband* (London, 1688), sigs. E3v and F.

31. Dalton, *Countray Justice*, 1635 ed., 281.

ject. Later, beside her sleeping husband, she thinks "with her self," "What will become of me? What am I to do! Here am I Threatned to be Murder'd, and I have no way in the World to Deliver my self, but by Beginning with him."³² Aubrey's subjectivity is depicted as the mid-wife's deliverance of herself, a birth which depends on a death; choosing to begin with him rather than risk being murdered herself, "immediately upon these thoughts," she stoutly undertakes the murder of her husband, strangling and dismembering him, and lugging parts of his body around in her petticoat to dispose of them.

Popular accounts of petty treason usually shy away from such risky representation of a wife's consciousness and articulation of rights, which are allied to violence by their very conception. The resulting attempts to account for the complexities of domestic friction and to achieve some sympathy for the abused wife, while keeping authority vested in the husband, however tyrannous, can verge on the absurd. Henry Goodcole, minister of Newgate, describes one "young and tender" wife, who, repenting after administering poison to her "old, peevish," and abusive husband, fruitlessly pleads with him to take an antidote to preserve his life. "Nay thou Strumpet and murderesse," Goodcole reports him as saying, "I will receive no helpe at all but I am resolv'd to dye and leave the world, be it for no other cause, but to have thee burnt at a stake for my death."³³ Although the wife is executed at Smithfield, Goodcole presents the husband, in his spiteful insistence on dying, as the agent. Sarah Elston, in her scaffold confession as recorded in *A Warning for Bad Wives*, "protested again most seriously, that she never in her life had the least designe or thoughts of killing [her husband], onely it was an unfortunate Accident; and whether it came by a blow from her, or his violent running upon the point of the Sizzars as she held them out to defend her self, she could not to this minute certainly tell."³⁴ These comic moments reveal how pamphleteers who wish to present murderous wives as penitent and pitiful must awkwardly scramble to shield them from the imputation of the intention and desire to kill, just as they are presented as shielding themselves from blows.

Texts like *The Adulteresses Funerall Day*, *A Warning for Bad Wives*, and *A Hellish Murder*, despite their titles, hesitantly attempt to convey what goes through a wife's mind when tied to the bedpost and whipped, or when ruminating beside the sleeping husband who has just violently assaulted her. But to present such women as assessing their hopeless situations and deciding to take violent action to escape them—to present them as subjects—is also to remove them from sympathy and to open up

32. *A Hellish Murder*, sig. Fv.

33. Goodcole, *Adulteresses Funerall Day*, sigs. Bv-B2.

34. *A Warning For Bad Wives: Or, The Manner of the Burning of Sarah Elston* (London, 1678), 6-7.

disturbing implications about the marital relation of authority and submission. Writers therefore displace responsibility onto the husbands—still in charge, even if drunken, violent, and absurdly self-destructive—who maniacally refuse antidotes and run wildly into scissors.

In representations of domestic conflict in early modern popular culture—ballads, pamphlets, and plays, shaming rituals and jokes—the wife diminishes or usurps her husband's claims to authority as she asserts herself by committing adultery, beating or bossing her husband, or plotting to kill him.³⁵ For instance, *Arden of Feversham*, a play about an actual case of petty treason to which I will return, can be seen as an extended cuckold joke. Like such jokes, and like popular shaming rituals such as the charivari, the play holds the cuckolded husband responsible for his wife's adultery and insubordination. Just as texts like *A Hellish Murder* present wives sympathetically yet hold them accountable for their actions, these comic representations construct husbands as ludicrous yet responsible. If the husband and wife become a joint subject at marriage, then, these popular representations seem to suggest, the wife's enlargement into volition, speech, and action necessarily implicates, diminishes, even eliminates, the husband. These popular representations push the logic of coverture to suggest an economy of marital subjectivity in which there is room for only one subject in any household; they constitute the wife as a subject only to the extent that they qualify her husband's claims to subject status by silencing and immobilizing him, and casting doubt on his authority and potency.

The fact that popular accounts of such crimes acknowledge the role of abuse in inciting women to murder challenges assumptions we still have about women's rights within marriage and the monolithic power of the patriarchy during this period. It also complicates the notion of petty treason by introducing the possibility of tyrannous household government, and by suggesting, albeit hesitantly, that there are some justifications for rebellion. Some husbands misuse their authority and misgovern their wives; some wives respond by violently wrenching subjectivity away from their husbands in this "him or me" contest. Certainly contemporary debates about the limits on conscientious submission to civil and domestic authorities have a bearing on relations within the household and the understanding of petty treason. Writers of sermons and conduct books about marriage explicitly include the situation of the godly wife in

35. On how participants in the charivari held husbands responsible for tolerating wives who defied their authority, see Boose, "Scolding Brides," 189-91; Davis, "Women on Top," 140; Martin Ingram, "Ridings, Rough Music and the 'Reform of Popular Culture' in Early Modern England," *Past and Present* 105 (Nov. 1984): 79-113; David Underdown, "The Taming of the Scold: The Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England" in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 116-36; and Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540-1620* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois, 1984), chapter 8.

their considerations of the limits on obedience to earthly authority, advocating a demanding balance between submission and resistance, silence and good counsel.³⁶ According to reported cases of petty treason that resulted in convictions, however, the circumstances in the household do not mitigate the wife's guilt. These women were executed as petty traitors despite their husbands' inadequacies as household governors. Although juries may actually have taken extenuating circumstances into consideration when they deliberated over cases of petty treason,³⁷ these texts both hold the husband responsible and depict the execution of the wife; they recognize limits to a husband's power over his wife, yet present a wife's violent resistance as ultimately unjustifiable and destructive of the political order.

Popular representations made these contradictions between husbandly authority and wifely submission visible, but did not resolve them. The writers of these texts acknowledge the conflict between telling the story from the wife's perspective and creating a subjectivity for her, on the one hand, and presenting an edifying tale of sin and retribution, on the other. The writer of *A Hellish Murder*, for instance, explains that "In the womans [Mary Aubrey's] Story, I have done all the Right that Honestly I could to the Compassionable Condition of an Unhappy Wretch, but without Extenuating the *Horror* of the *Wickedness*." Goodcole, discussing the unnamed battered wife, concedes that "Her injuries, and harsh and unmanly usage spurred on by the instigations of the divell, *almost* compeld her to what she did."³⁸ In the process of narrating these women's crimes, the texts reveal an economy of subjectivity within marriage, by which subjectivity can be conferred on the wife only when the husband relinquishes his claim to this limited, contested status. The wife's violence and the husband's failure to fulfill the obligations that accompany his authority collaborate to evacuate the role of the subject. By making the murderous wife the protagonist and by representing the husband's inadequacy and death as the conditions under which she can be constructed as a subject, these texts disturbingly reveal the contradictions and violence underlying early modern marriage, even if they abruptly foreclose exploration by asserting the moral, recording the woman's punishment, and restoring moral order and domestic hierarchy.

36. See, for instance, Thomas Gataker, *Marriage Duties Briefely Couched Together* (London, 1620), sigs. C4-C4v. On the spiritual justifications for civil (and domestic) disobedience, see Constance Jordan, "Woman's Rule in Sixteenth-Century British Political Thought," *Renaissance Quarterly* XL.3 (1987): 435, and Richard Strier, "Faithful Servants: Shakespeare's Praise of Disobedience" in *The Historical Renaissance: New Essays on Tudor and Stuart Literature and Culture*, ed. Strier and Heather Dubrow (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 104-33.

37. In the master's thesis on which she is now working, Julie A. Sikkink (History, Duke University) explores the discrepancy between the legal definition of petty treason and its application in the early modern English courtroom. I am grateful to Ms. Sikkink for sharing her work with me.

38. *A Hellish Murder*, sig. F4; Goodcole, *Adulteresses Funerall Day*, sig. Bv, (emphasis mine).

III. STRATEGIES FOR NARRATING THE UNSPEAKABLE: ADULTERY, CONSPIRING DEPENDENTS, AND THE REDEFINITION OF MARRIAGE

Other popular pamphlets present murderous wives not as acting against abusive husbands, but as acting (often in collusion with a lover) against the institution of marriage, which requires their subordination, restricts them to sexual partners whom they have not chosen freely or of whom they have grown tired, and prevents them from having their own way. One might expect such women to be presented as villainesses, against whose stories grave, chaste matrons should stop their ears, as one writer advises. But this group of texts, like those that present the stories of battered wives, discovers contradictions within the constructions of the wife's role and within the ideology of marriage. Just as petty treason itself simultaneously constructs wives as subordinate and as capable of violent insubordination, these texts represent women who are married, yet, through adultery and murder, resolutely refuse the role of wife and in their actions violate and parody that role. Thus, in this group of texts, the married woman's subjectivity is still defined in relation to her role as wife, but is located explicitly in resistance to that role.

This resistance takes various forms, but it is always represented as violent. Many representations of estranged, rebellious wives locate their subjectivity in adulterous sexual desire and willfulness, linking both to murder. In *The Adulteresses Funerall Day* (1635), Henry Goodcole, Alice Clarke's minister during her imprisonment, wrestles with the dilemma of presenting the murderous wife both as an agent, which she must be to justify the way that she is held accountable for her actions, vividly recorded in the title and the gruesome woodcut of Alice in flames on the title page, and as a sympathetic victim. In Alice's two "confessions," both of which Goodcole records in the third person and which he either mediates or composes, descriptions of her various sexual alliances conflate unregulated sexuality and murderousness. All of the men with whom she has sex contribute to her plan to murder her husband. While the description of Alice's various attachments contributes to a depiction of her as a voraciously desiring subject who shifts her attentions from one object to another, and relies on murder to enable her to substitute a lover for her husband, it also presents her as acted upon by the various men with whom she allies, however briefly. In Goodcole's narrative, first Alice confesses Henry White's role in giving her money for the poison and urging her to kill her husband; second, she confesses that before she married, her master got her pregnant and subsequently arranged her marriage to Clarke "whom shee could not love, nor no way effect"; third, she confesses that a man of Hillenden "inticed her, to run away from her Husband, with him beyond the Seas" and also urged her to poison her

husband;³⁹ finally, she confesses that her husband seized the poison from her and took it of his own volition. So Goodcole constructs Alice as confessing "freely and voluntarily" not her own transgressions but those of all of the men who advised her. He thus presents her violent rebellion against her abusive husband not as an independent act but as a submission to other men.⁴⁰

By displacing blame onto these four men, Alice Clarke, in Goodcole's narrative, displays her own promiscuously shifting allegiances even as she attempts to exonerate herself. Goodcole presents her transgression as the "selfe-will" to which she was "so addicted," as desire that refuses to be contained within marriage and metamorphoses into murder.⁴¹ Thus, Goodcole's solution to his dilemma is to shift the grounds of her transgressive agency from independent, violent action to self-will, which is presented largely in sexual terms. Simultaneously revealing and suppressing a wife's subjectivity, he downplays the implication that women are capable of conceiving and executing violence, yet still holds Alice responsible for her husband's death. For him, her culpability resides in her character and consciousness more than in what she actually does.

Other pamphlets about petty treason similarly conflate adultery and murder. In *A Briefe Discourse of Two Most Cruell and Bloudie Murthers, Committed Bothe in Worcestershire*, Mrs. Beast seduces her servant, and enjoys being "carnally acquaint[ed]" with him, "till lust had gotten so much power of the Woman: as she began altogether to loathe and dislike her Husband, and preferre the fleshly dealings of her new companion so much, as she must needs seeke and practise the death of her Husband." In this passage, the rapid slide from Mrs. Beast's desire for another man to her loathing for her husband and then to her plan to kill him, succinctly exemplifies how these texts associate female sexual desire that quests beyond marriage with violence. As Alice Clarke was addicted "unto selfe-will," Mrs. Beast "must needs have her will." The same "devilish desire" that leads her to pursue her servant sexually leads her to incite him to kill her husband and his master, so that the lovers may "live merrily together."⁴²

A similar slide from one transgression to another occurs in *A True Relation of the Most Inhumane and Bloody Murther, of Master James, Minister and Preacher* (1609), in which Master James' curate, Lowe, is

39. Goodcole, sigs. Cv and Cv-C2.

40. See Carol Z. Wiener, "Sex-Roles and Crime in Late Elizabethan Hertfordshire," *Journal of Social History* 8.4 (1975): 38-60.

41. Goodcole, *Adulteresses Funerall Day*, sig. B2.

42. *A Briefe Discourse of Two Most Cruell and Bloudie Murthers* (London, 1583), sigs. B2-B2v and B3. On the slide from one offense to another, see Cynthia Herrup, "Law and Morality in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past and Present* 106 (Feb. 1985): 102-23 and Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed" in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), 123-42.

presented plotting “how and which way he might raise his estate, to the very height and toppe of his desires, viz. If hee could but inauget or graft himselfe into the love of his Mistresse.” The text thus presents adultery with Mistress James as a means to Lowe’s ambitious end. Although the wife’s involvement in the plot begins as a desire *for* the curate rather than resentment *against* her husband, once again, adulterous desire is presented as leading inevitably to murder. In this text, the devil is described advising Lowe that “the breach of all the commandements is but death, and one is no lesse. Adultery is a sinne, and murther is no more, withal, how much more better it was to live like a Master then a slave, to command then to be commanded.”⁴³ Through adultery and its correlate, a murder plot, the wife’s sexual desire and the curate’s ambition commingle to become the same kind of desire to live like a master rather than a slave. Both *A Briefe Discourse* and *A True Relation* construct the husbands and masters only as victims, shadowy figures who fade into the background as their wives and servants command the foreground through violently asserted desire.

Although Mrs. James takes no active role in the murder and claims not even to have known about it, *A True Relation*, and the penal process it depicts, construe her alliance with Lowe, and its role in enabling his plot against her husband, as a felony punishable by death. Presenting Mrs. James as manipulated by Lowe and uninvolved in the murder plot, the text still presents her as culpable in her enactment of desires that her marriage could not fill, especially the desire to command rather than to be commanded. She is adjudged a principal in petty treason and burned at the stake.

Accounts of petty treason often link the insubordinations of dependents, presenting a man’s wife and servant as conspiring against him. In addition to linking the murderous wife and servant as lovers and conspirators, these texts also represent the subjectivities of petty traitors, whether wives or servants, in similar terms. Like texts that focus on the murderous wife, those that focus on the ambitious, frustrated servant locate that servant’s subjectivity in anger and violence, even to the point of breaking unexpectedly and sporadically into the first person. For instance, in “The Cruell Murther of Maister Browne in Suffolke” (1605), as Peter Golding reflects on his master’s recent conduct (promising extraordinary preferment—marriage to his daughter and a portion of land—then withholding it), the narrative lurches suddenly from “*he remembred*” to “*I will be most subtile, and my revenge most sodaine.*” Made to articulate the threat that all of these texts explore, the threat of the dependent who silently nurses grievances and plots “subtile” and “sodaine” revenge, the servant is also presented as having a sense of

43. *A True Relation of the . . . Murther, of Master James*, sigs. A3r-v and A4.

injury—of his *rights*—and as feeling and speaking his frustration. As in the accounts of wives killing their husbands, the subordinate finds a voice and is constructed as a subject at the moment that he articulates a grievance and vows to redress that wrong: “I have wrong, and you are guilty of it.”⁴⁴ The threat the servant offers lies in his resistance to his master’s subsumption of him, which is also presented as the means by which he can be constituted as a speaking subject.⁴⁵ In this text, as in *A True Relation*, the wife is adjudged a petty traitor, a principal rather than an accessory, and burned at the stake, although Mrs. Browne’s involvement in the plot against her husband is even more tenuous than Mrs. James’. In fact, she is barely implicated; that she is convicted nonetheless suggests that in the structure shaping such texts, the wife and servant are assumed to be in alliance and are both defeated, regardless of their actual roles in the crime.

Perhaps the most famous seventeenth-century representation of a subordinate’s escalation from ambition to betrayal, and of the interrelation between that subordinate’s assertion of himself and his destruction of his master, is *Othello* (1604). Although the most discussed domestic conflict in the play is between husband and wife, Othello and Desdemona, the play begins with Iago’s delineation of the conflict between himself and Othello, which he describes as both professional and domestic; Iago first presents himself as a *servant* and Othello as his *master*. In the first scene of the play, when Iago complains about arbitrary preferment as “the curse of service” he also proposes a solution to that curse, a strategy in response to it:

I follow him [Othello] to serve my turn upon him:
We cannot be all masters, nor all masters
Cannot be truly follow’d.⁴⁶

By this strategy, Iago cunningly transforms obedience into self-promotion and pursues his master’s interests only to the extent that they overlap with his own: “In following him, I follow but myself” (1.1.58). As opposed to “duteous and knee-crooking” servants, Iago links himself with those who “have some soul”; that soul is found in the scandalous separation between the servant’s interest and the master’s interest:

44. This text is included in *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* (London, 1605), rpt. in *Illustrations of Early English Popular Literature*, ed. J. Payne Collier (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), 1.30-31 (emphases mine) and 1.30.

45. On violence against servants, see Cockburn, “Patterns,” 97-98; Houlbrooke, *English Family*, 175-76; Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 85-88; Sarah C. Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 190, 172-74; and Steven R. Smith, “The London Apprentices as Seventeenth-Century Adolescents,” *Past and Present* 61 (Nov. 1973): 152-53.

46. William Shakespeare, *Othello* (Arden edition), ed. M. R. Ridley (London: Methuen, 1958), 1.1.35, 42-44. Subsequent citations will be in the text.

others there are,
 Who, trimm'd in forms, and visages of duty,
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves. (1.1.49-51)

In Iago's view, presented as villainous, "outward action" and "the native act, and figure of my heart" cannot correspond for a servant (61-62). While self-interest is too dangerous a livery to wear, the master's livery should also not shape the servant too much, because, in Iago's view, a servant's subjectivity exists only in resistance.

In this play, as opposed to *A True Relation* or "The Cruel Murder of Maister Browne," the treacherous servant works against rather than in collusion with the wife, who is diminished rather than constituted by means of the plot against her husband. While, as critics have argued, Desdemona dwindles in response to Othello's suspicions, Iago "attends on himself" by means of fostering those suspicions and "engendering" a plot against his master which exploits both Othello's distrust of his wife and his trust in his ensign. Desdemona's "visionary construction of marriage," her attempt to reinvent it to accommodate both spouses as subjects and heroes, is decisively defeated by Iago's reinvention of service.⁴⁷ For Iago, to make service bearable is to so redefine the verbs "serve," "follow," and "attend" that they are no longer recognizable.

Just as *Othello* presents Iago as destroying the concept of service by carving a place for his "soul" within it, some representations of husband-killing depict murderous wives as destroying the institution of marriage by their violent attempts to remake it to suit themselves. The conception that the husband subsumes his wife, asserted in legal discourses and scrutinized in these accounts of petty treason, is based on the assumption that marriage permanently transforms both husband and wife, enlarging one and diminishing the other, regardless of the circumstances leading up to the marriage. A text such as *The Trueth of the Most Wicked and Secret Murthering of John Brewen, Goldsmith* (1592) explores how an enforced marriage might prepare a wife to resist the transformations that are supposed to accompany marriage.

In this text, Anne Welles must choose between two goldsmiths, best friends and rivals for her hand. She prefers John Parker, whom the narrator warns us is the less deserving. When she "despises" John Brewen's suit, but refuses to return his gifts, he has her arrested and only dismisses the charges when she agrees to marry him. The narrator conveys Anne's shame and frustration: "the stout damsel, that had never before been in the like daunger, [is] so astonished and dismayed" that she submits, trading one form of imprisonment for another. As soon as Anne is released

47. On the "heroics of marriage" in *Othello*, see Rose, *Expense of Spirit*, 131-55. See also Arthur Kirsch, *Shakespeare and the Experience of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981) and Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980).

from jail, Parker, the rejected suitor, begins to work on her sense of entrapment, "and with bitter speeches so taunted and checked her, that she repented the promise she made to Brewen, although she could not any way amend it." Thus, when she enters the marriage, she is determined to escape Brewen by killing him and marrying Parker. As a result, she refuses to be a wife to Brewen from the beginning of the marriage:

Now, she had not been married to Brewen above three dayes, when she put in practise to poyson him. And although the honest young man loved her tenderly, yet had she conceived such deadly hatred against him, that she lay not with him after the first night of her mariage; neither would she abide to be called after his name, but still to be termed Anne Welles, as she was before; and to excuse her from his bed, she sayd she had vowed never to lie by him more till he had gotten her a better house.⁴⁸

Welles refuses the shared name, shared household, and shared bed of marriage. If marriage makes husband and wife one flesh, blurring the boundaries between them, she uses her different name and address to announce her resistance to wifely coverture, and her right to make demands in her own interest.

Since, in accounts of petty treason, to stand apart from one's husband is to stand against him, Anne Welles' self-interest and separateness quickly manifest themselves in violence. Just as Brewen strategized to get Welles to marry him, she as cleverly and ruthlessly manipulates his expectations of wifely nurturance and intimacy. Entering his house only to kill him, her first wifely gesture toward him is to offer him the poisoned "measse of suger soppes." She plays the role of the good wife only long enough to get him to eat the poisoned food. "Wife (quoth he) . . . I take it very kindly that you will doe so much for me: alas! husband (quoth she), if I could not find in my heart to doe so small a matter for you (especially being so lately married) you might justly judge me unkinde: and therwithall [she] went to make ready his last meat."⁴⁹ Having played the part long enough to administer the poison, Anne abandons it, refusing to visit or nurse the dying man. Although Anne Welles is presented as daringly retaining her own name, refusing cohabitation, and, in an action presented as the inevitable outcome of such self-assertions, poisoning her husband, she is also presented as acting in alliance with another man and as substituting debasement for subordination.

While the text presents Anne Welles' murder of John Brewen as a rebellion against wifely subordination, it also presents her as attempting to achieve another marriage, rather than independence, by means of

48. *The Trueth of the Most Wicked and Secret Murthering of John Brewen*, 7, 8, and 8-9.

49. *The Trueth*, 9-10.

murder. Her violent rebellion entraps her further, making her the "slave" of a brutal man rather than the wife of an "honest young man [who] loved her tenderly." Her lover and collaborator in the murder, John Parker, makes constant and unreasonable demands, which she is afraid to deny:

to [such] slavery and subjection did he bring her, that she must runne or goe wheresoever he pleased to appoint her, held he up but his finger at any time: if she denied him either money, or whatsoever else he listed to request, he would haule and pull her as was pittie to behold; yea, and threaten to stabbe and thrust her through with his dagger, did she not as he would have her in all things.

After much mutual recrimination, Parker accuses Welles of being too dangerous to marry; her murderousness makes it impossible for him to imagine her as his wife:

Out, arrant queane! (quoth he): thou wouldst marry me to the end thou mightest poyson me, as thou didst thy husband; but for that cause I meane to keepe me as long out of thy fingers as I can, and accurst be I, if I trust thee, or hazard my life in thy hands.⁵⁰

Parker's horror at Anne Welles' crime and his fear of making himself vulnerable to her have not prevented him from bullying and impregnating her, but he cannot *marry* her. While the text presents Welles as pursuing Parker as a husband despite his role in the murder of his best friend and his bad treatment of her, it presents Parker as recoiling at the conjunction of murderess and wife, irreconcilable by definition.

Indeed, Welles' rebellion against wifeliness seems to have redefined marriage and inverted the conjugal hierarchy the two lovers anticipate, leading them both to expect, for however different reasons, that marriage would empower rather than subordinate her. Parker seems to fear her violence only if they are married; Welles seems to assume that marriage will prevent or ameliorate his abuses. Although Welles seeks a second marriage both in spite of and by means of her violation of her first, her adultery, rebellion against wifeliness, and capacity for violence conjoin to disqualify her for the conventional role of wife and to redefine that role as one of power, cunning, and threat. *The Murthering of John Brewen* thus presents Welles' murder of her husband as a bid for independence that leads only to enslavement, public humiliation, and death, but also as redefining marriage until it becomes unrecognizable and horrifying, even to the rather ruthless Parker. By contrasting Welles' and her lover's responses to one another after the murder, the text demonstrates that the violence by which wives assert themselves marks them as threatening, unwomanly, and unmarriageable. In attempting to stretch the definition

50. *The Trueth*, 13 and 14.

of wife to accommodate her subjectivity, a woman like Anne Welles creates a contradiction in terms, the murderous wife. Making these irreconcilable contradictions visible, Welles' story parodies and undermines the available conceptions of marriage.

IV. PERFORMANCE SCRIPTS AND THE COMPETING VOICES OF PETTY TREASON

In exploring how these contradictions can conjoin in a single person—the murderous wife, the rebellious subordinate, the subsumed subject—pamphlet narratives hesitantly shape motives and voices for the female transgressors whose stories they tell. But, as I have shown, representing wives' transgressive subjectivity creates a dilemma for the writers of pamphlets, who attempt to present a unified, unambiguous perspective on petty treason, reassuring readers that it is wrong and unjustifiable, that it will always be found out, and that it will be punished. The explorations of motive and eruptions into voice that enliven these texts also disrupt them, and the writers hastily close off the avenues they have just opened up by asserting the moral and recording the woman's punishment. Although the basic plot of petty treason—wife or servant kills the master of the house—requires pamphlet writers to create multiple subject positions and voices, the attempt to restore the order disturbed by the crime limits the exploration of multiple and competing subjectivities within the household.

While the writers of pamphlet narratives struggle to construct voices for petty traitors without subverting their own texts or the social order, writers of performance scripts—ballads and plays—face an even greater challenge. They must invent voices for criminal women that will be raised by singers and players, not merely read. Ballads about murderous wives rely on a particularly ingenious way to grant female offenders a voice without seeming to sympathize with or endorse their actions. They allow them to speak only from the dead. Written in the voices of condemned women, who speak *after* their executions, these ballads even attempt to convey the experience of being burned to death:

And there in Smithfield at a stake,
My latest breath I there did take.

. . .

And being chayned to the Stake,
both Reedes and Faggots then
Close to my Body there was set,
with Pitch, Tarre, and Rozen. . .⁵¹

51. "The Unnatural Wife: Or, The Lamentable Murther, of One Goodman Davis . . . By His Wife" (1628), rpt. in *A Pepysian Garland: Black-letter Broadside Ballads of the Years 1595-1639*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1922), 287.

Ballads thus record the murderous wife's voice without undermining the unified perspective essential to didacticism by making the wife articulate the moral condemnation of her own actions:

Then hasty hairebraind wives take heed,
 of me a warning take,
 Least like to me in coole of blood,
 you burn't be at a stake.⁵²

In these ballads, the murderous wife, here Alice Davis, speaks as if from within, but views herself from without.

Thus ballads construct and invite the singer to take up the voice not of the transgressor, but of the condemned, the disciplined. Singing in the petty traitor's voice, to the extent that it invites any imaginative identification, involves the singer in the process of dying, not of choosing to kill. Yet the voice the ballads place in the woman's mouth is so unambivalently condemnatory that the perspective remains estranged even from the woman's suffering. Singers and listeners are positioned as spectators of her death, as well as fellow sufferers. Despite their titles, such ballads offer more than a warning; like the public executions they represent, they also offer the ghoulish thrill of *someone else's* suffering.

As Anne Schotter has argued, songs written in the voices of aggrieved women may resemble those written in the voices of other creatures for whom subjectivity is an unimaginable and ludicrous possibility, such as a roast swan. Such works achieve an almost comic distancing, "by pretending for a moment to take seriously the sufferings of a creature alien to the audience."⁵³ Margaret Doody sees a similar dynamic in Civil War ballads, which present "the self-exposition by the absurd enemy of his absurd point of view" and depend on what she calls "ventriloquism" or the singer's assumption of the persona of an opposite or other even as far as the process of dying. In such cases, she argues, "singing the ballad is not only highly aggressive, but also oddly suicidal."⁵⁴ In such ballads, then, the singer or auditor is engaged in both identification with and alienation from the woman's voice; she is invited both to share the woman's guilt and to observe her punishment from a distance. However, by focusing from start to finish on executions, ballads in the voices of petty traitors do not enable the imaginative enactment of the process of choosing to kill one's husband.

Heywood's *Apology for Actors*, with which I began, addresses the troublesome possibility of women's identification with petty traitors by

52. "A Warning for All Desperate Women" (1628), rpt. in *A Pepysian Garland*, 289.

53. Anne Howland Schotter, "Woman's Song in Medieval Latin" in *Vox Feminae: Studies in Medieval Woman's Song*, ed. John F. Plummer (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan Univ. Press, 1981), 29.

54. Margaret Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 45 and 33.

sternly resolving the ambiguity; in his account, female spectators identify with remorse, not with the desire to kill. But examination of the kinds of plays to which Heywood refers, performance scripts based on actual crimes, suggests that such plays, even more than those narratives we have already examined, might elicit responses more unpredictable and disruptive than confession. Because the drama as a form is more committed to the exploration of conflict than its resolution, and must by its very nature present multiple subjectivities and voices, it can represent petty treason without subverting its own purposes and conventions.⁵⁵ It does not need, therefore, to present its murderous wives as safely dead or to retreat from the contradiction that they embody.

Although the drama has resources for exploring the reasons for and implications of petty treason unavailable in other popular genres, as we will see, the murderous wife remains a less prominent figure on the stage than Heywood's *Apology* might lead us to believe. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude is implicated in her husband's death; in *The Changeling*, Beatrice-Joanna hires De Flores to murder her betrothed so that she can choose another. But the decision to kill one's husband and the process of doing so rarely claim center stage. Only two dramatizations of actual husband murders, committed by non-noble women and set in familiar English locations, survive. These are *Arden of Faversham* (1592) and *A Warning For Fair Women* (1599).⁵⁶

I would like to conclude with a relatively extended analysis of *Arden of Faversham*, a play published in 1592 about a crime committed in 1551. This play, about a wife's conspiracy with her lover (a steward and her social inferior) and her husband's inferiors and dependents to murder him, can best be understood in the context of the other representations of petty treason that we have examined, as a particularly complex example of how representations of petty treason make the contradictions of a wife's subjectivity visible.

In their attempts to emphasize the fairness and efficacy of the judicial process, and its ability to know and reform the transgressor, the pamphlets discussed so far claim that the criminal can be coerced or persuaded into "sincerity." The drama, in contrast, casts doubt on this conception of a unified, knowable self that can be enacted and articulated. *Arden of Faversham* presents Alice Arden, the murderous wife, not only as a character in a story of petty treason, but also as the skillful manipulator of possible versions of the narrative of the murderous wife. As I have shown, some pamphlet narratives, such as Goodcole's *The*

55. Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978); and Rose, *Expense of Spirit*, esp. 131.

56. See Frances E. Dolan, "Gender, Moral Agency, and Dramatic Form in *A Warning For Fair Women*," *Studies in English Literature* 29 (1989): 201-18; and Betty S. Travitsky, "Husband-Murder and Petty Treason in English Renaissance Tragedy," *Renaissance Drama*, n. s. XXI (1990): 171-98.

Adulteresses Funerall Day, evoke sympathy for a murderous wife by displacing responsibility onto her abusive husband; *Arden of Faversham* presents Alice as self-consciously employing the same strategy. Offering no evidence that Arden mistreats Alice, the play presents her as playing the part of the abused wife in order to secure sympathy and avoid blame for her adultery, her open defiance of her husband, and, eventually, her act of murder. Alice first performs this part to enlist the sympathy and assistance of Master Greene:

Ah, Master Greene, be it spoken in secret here,
 I never live good day with him alone.
 When he is at home, then have I froward looks,
 Hard words, and blows to mend the match withal.
 And, though I might content as good a man,
 Yet doth he keep in every corner trulls;
 And, weary with his trugs at home,
 Then rides he straight to London. There, forsooth,
 He reveals it among such filthy ones
 As counsels him to make away his wife.
 Thus live I daily in continual fear,
 In sorrow, so despairing of redress
 As every day I wish with hearty prayer
 That he or I were taken forth the world.⁵⁷

Alice here offers a vivid description of husbandly "ill usage." By describing herself as having been displaced by prostitutes at home and abroad, and as in danger of blows and of being made away, Alice enables Greene to turn his own anger at Arden's landgrabbing into the chivalrous rescue of a damsel in distress: "I shall be the man/Shall set you free from all this discontent" (I.511-12). Alice's proposed solution to her dilemma closely resembles Mary Aubrey's formulation in response to her husband's assault: "I have no way in the world to Deliver my Self, but by Begining with him."⁵⁸ While *A Hellish Murder* struggles to come to terms with Aubrey's violent response to abuse presented as *actual*, *Arden of Faversham* shows Alice Arden similarly proposing that the solution to marital discord is that "he or I" must die, although the abuse and fear she describes as motivating this desperate response are presented as *invented*.

The play also presents Alice as playing the abused wife to manipulate Arden and to place him at fault. After another of Alice's schemes has backfired, she boldly accuses Arden of being a bad husband, and therefore responsible for their difficulties:

57. *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham*, ed. M. L. Wine (London: Methuen, 1973), I.492-505. Subsequent citations will be in the text. My reading of the play is informed by Belsey, *Subject of Tragedy*, chapter 5; Lena Cowen Orlin, "Man's House as His Castle in *Arden of Faversham*," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 2 (1985): 57-89; and Wine's excellent edition.

58. *A Hellish Murder*, sig. Fv.

Ah me accursed,
 To link in liking with a frantic man!
 Henceforth I'll be thy slave, no more thy wife;
 For with that name I never shall content thee.
 If I be merry, thou straightways thinks me light;
 If sad, thou sayest the sullens trouble me;
 If well attired, thou thinks I will be gadding;
 If homely, I seem sluttish in thine eye.
 Thus am I still, and shall be while I die,
 Poor wench abused by thy misgovernment. (XIII.104-13)

This is an extraordinarily detailed and impassioned depiction of the experience of the misgoverned wife that depends on the view that wives should not be slaves. The playwright not only imagines and articulates this perspective, but presents Alice herself as *constructing* and inhabiting the role of the abused wife. It is unusual in itself to find a wife's experience of misinterpretation and mistreatment so vividly portrayed, but even more unusual to see her making a good case against a bad husband for her own purposes. In the play, Alice is presented as a woman whose complaints about abuse are "cunningly performed"; she even draws attention to her own performances (I.417-19). In addition to presenting Alice as a skillful manipulator of effect, the play explores the subjectivity from which she chooses those roles and the desires that motivate her performances.

While *Arden of Faversham* presents Alice as self-consciously and dexterously playing the part of the ill-used wife in order to manipulate her audiences, when the play presents her alone, and, apparently, as speaking "sincerely," it is as a wife who acts *against* marriage, and who imagines murder as the only way to move from one embrace to another: "I shall no more be closed in Arden's arms,/ . . . Mosby's [her lover's] arms/ Shall compass me" (XIV.143; 145-6). Like Anne Welles in *The Murdering of John Brewen*, and other murderous wives who are presented as acting against the institution of marriage and its constraints as much as against their particular husbands, Alice is presented as violating domesticity and marriage. Alice poisons her husband's broth, welcomes a steward into their bed, and, in her husband's absence, makes her lover both master of her heart and of the house (I.639-40); she licenses Mosby to play the "husband's part" sexually and domestically (I.638).

Also like Anne Welles, Alice is presented not as escaping marriage, but as attempting to reshape it to fill her own needs. She does not want to kill Arden out of anger but because she wishes to replace him with another husband, equally possessive and authoritative. She imagines her substitution of one man for another as a transfer of the "title" to herself:

Sweet Mosby is the man that hath my heart;
 And he usurps it, having nought but this,

That I am tied to him by marriage.
 Love is a god, and marriage is but words;
 And therefore Mosby's title is the best.
 Tush! Whether it be or no, he shall be mine
 In spite of him, of Hymen, and of rites. (I.98-104)

In this passage, Alice's vague pronouns obscure the difference between Arden and Mosby, one husband/owner and another. In the course of the passage, Alice also abandons her attempt to argue in terms of men's rights and titles, finally asserting her own desire to possess ("*he shall be mine*") and to get what she wants. At certain points in the play, Alice is even presented as rebelling against Arden's authority over her and asserting her desire for self-government:

Why should he thrust his sickle in our corn,
 Or what hath he to do with thee, my love,
 Or govern me that am to rule myself? (X.83-85)

But such moments are transitory. Alice is not generally presented as seeking *self*-government; she seeks, rather, the liberty to *elect* her governor.

Yet, like Anne Welles, whose lover is afraid to marry a woman who would murder her husband, even if out of love for him, Alice announces herself as unmarriageable when she so attempts to choose her master or substitute one for another. The play qualifies the anticipated marriage between Mosby and Alice by presenting Mosby as fearing Alice's dangerous attraction to adultery and murder. Shortly after Mosby imagines that marriage will "make us two but one," he reveals his inability to imagine that he could absorb Alice into himself, subsume her enough to sleep easily in the usurped bed:

But what for that I may not trust you, Alice?
 You have supplanted Arden for my sake,
 And will extirpen me to plant another.
 'Tis fearful sleeping in a serpent's bed,
 And I will cleanly rid my hands of her. (VIII.39-43)

As Alice uses violence to reassert her subjectivity and to reshape the role of wife, Mosby plans to use violence to reassert husbandly authority over Alice. Again, if husband and wife, man and woman, cannot *both* be subjects in the same bed, then the subjectivity of one requires the subordination or extermination of the other. Alice has made it clear that the institution of marriage and the role it constructs for the wife cannot deprive her of consciousness, language, and agency. Since Mosby cannot imagine a marriage in which he and Alice could both be subjects, he must secure his own "place" at her expense, as she has secured hers at Arden's. While the play, like other accounts of the conspiracy of wife and servant, associates adultery with ambition, and presents both as lead-

ing to violence, it does not present adultery and ambition, wife and servant, as equal. In Mosby's plan to kill Alice, the spats between the lovers woven throughout the plot, and the couple's final recriminations, the play vividly dramatizes the competition between Mosby and Alice for the same place.

It would seem that Alice's self-possession and self-assertion, which look particularly bold when compared to the depictions of wifely volition in other texts, must lead to violence. In *Arden of Faversham*, as in other accounts of petty treason, adultery and murder collapse into one another. Alice explains that she is driven to murder Arden because violence is the only way that she can enjoy Mosby freely and openly, can transform him from a clandestine lover into the master of the house:

Yet nothing could enforce me to the deed
But Mosby's love. Might I without control
Enjoy thee still, then Arden should not die;
But seeing I cannot, therefore let him die. (I.273-76)

Mosby responds to Alice's resigned acceptance of Arden's death as a profession of devotion: "Enough, sweet Alice; thy kind words makes me melt" (I.277). Earlier, Alice asks Mosby to recall the moment of intimacy in which they pledged their troth, that is, to murder Arden:

Remember, when I locked thee in my closet,
What were thy words and mine? Did we not both
Decree to murder Arden in the night? (I.191-93)

Desire, affection, and violence are so closely associated in the play, that the murder plot becomes the consummation of Alice's and Mosby's affair.

In blurring the distinction between violence and transgressive sexuality, the play also conflates social aspiration and sexual desire. For instance, the apprentice Michael plans to kill his brother and seize his land as a means of winning over Mosby's sister Susan: "Who would not venture upon house and land/When he may have it for a right-down blow?" (I.174-75). Throughout the play, the assiduous conspirators follow Michael's strategy of venturing upon gain by means of blows. All of the conspirators rely on violence to gain money or land, and to resculpt their social positions. Black Will and Shakebag, the hired killers, kill Arden for 10 pounds; Alice kills him to get Mosby; Mosby kills him for Alice and for Arden's house and lands; Greene conspires to regain his land; and Michael and the painter cooperate in an attempt to win Susan in marriage. In this play, to desire a lover is to be willing to kill to get him or her; to want another man's land is similarly to be willing to kill to get it.

In the play's climax—the murder of Arden—the confluence of sexual and social insurgencies and violence finds its most vivid representation.

As Mosby stabs Arden, he reminds him of an earlier confrontation in which Arden had seized Mosby's sword and belittlingly urged him to arm himself with a pressing iron instead, thereby attempting to reverse his rival's rise from tailor to steward. Settling the score, Mosby thus announces the murder as an act of social rebellion: "There's for the pressing iron you told me of" (XIV.235). In the prose accounts of the crime, Mosby actually bludgeons Arden with a pressing iron. It may not be a gentleman's weapon, but it can secure a gentleman's place. Alice, to the horror of her servant, demands the knife in order strike her own blow against the dying Arden: "What, groans thou?—Nay, then give me the weapon!/Take this for hind'ring Mosby's love and mine" (237-38). The play thus presents the murder as the ultimate, violent refusal of subsumption.

Popular accounts of petty treason locate the subjectivity of wives and servants in such refusal and resistance, and, consequently, in violence, prior to and apart from acts of petty treason. The petty traitors' thoughts, words, and desires, as well as their acts of adultery and murder, are presented as betrayals. Since wives cannot choose new husbands, nor servants choose to become masters, such marginal figures' longings for change must be construed as potentially violent. To desire a man other than one's husband, or to aspire to one's master's authority and wealth, is to challenge the whole social order that regulates sexuality and reproduction, the distribution of property, and the hierarchies of authority and submission. In using the resources of the drama to act out the competing voices that characterize petty treason plots, *Arden of Faversham* registers both the violence and the vitality of scheming subordinates in their attempts to seize the master's—the only—subject-position. While the play achieves closure by listing the fates of all the conspirators, it also reveals what has been lost, silenced, and repressed in the process of restoring order. We are left with a starkly bare stage: Arden is dead and eight conspirators are marched off to execution, Alice as a petty traitor and the rest as murderers and accessories to murder. Arden's house is no longer a locus of conflict simply because it is empty.

V. CONCLUSION

While representations of murderous wives emphasize the apprehension, condemnation, and execution of the offenders, they also present violence and resistance as the means by which women could be constituted and recognized as subjects in the early modern period. The process that convicts and publicly punishes petty traitors—reducing them to ashes—also holds them accountable for their actions in a way that exposes the contradictions of women's, especially wives', legal status in this period. The accounts of petty treason written in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries construct the household, the courtroom, the scaffold,

and the pyre as arenas in which wives assert themselves and are held accountable for doing so. Since men's and women's representations of women in early modern England suggest a range of available agencies, to define agency as physical action, or in this case as violence, is unnecessarily to diminish women's access to agency in the culture. But I am interested here in a discourse that constructed the emergence of married women's subjectivity into visibility as violent.

In accounts of petty treason, married women's subjectivity is represented both as agency—words and deeds in the world and accountability for them—and as self-awareness. In these texts, both forms of subjectivity are represented as transgressive and violent. In killing their husbands, early modern women transgressed the cultural boundaries which were supposed to delimit their subjectivity. Those texts that represent their actions, therefore, worry the relationships among female gender, subjectivity, and violence that such crimes enact and that threaten domestic and gender hierarchies.

The stories of women who plot against their husbands articulate and shape fears of the dangers lurking within the home, of women's voracious and ranging sexual appetites and capacities for violence, and of the instability of masculine privilege and power. In so succinctly articulating deep and complexly linked fears of disorder, these stories become a cultural resource for evoking and manipulating anxieties about that intersection of culturally determined boundaries and individual agency which is both the location of the subject and, in accounts of petty treason, a collision, a site of violence.

