

“Some will judge too trivial, some too grave”: Audience and Interpretation in Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness*

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This paper examines how Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, first performed in 1603/4, interacts with its audience. I initially analyse the drama’s structure - noting how Heywood reminds the audience of their interpretive responsibility through liminal stage orations (the collective term for epilogues and prologues), and *via* direct address throughout the work. The epilogue and the prologue bookend a play which pointedly grants its audiences the opportunity to become judges of the drama - an active status conferred by the interactive model of performance envisaged in this work. As a result of this interactive imagining of interpretation, I place the play within a theoretical framework which argues that early modern drama uses the ambiguity which attends representations of judgement as an invigorating element of performance.

The public theatre was part of a nascent entertainment industry in the period, and the need to appeal to diverse audiences was mirrored by the number of contradictory sympathies many early modern plays display. In *A Woman Killed*, the specific judgements the play represents to the audience are indicative of a larger debate in early modern England surrounding the female. The patriarchal understanding that the female was a subordinate controlled by a male guardian is invoked in the play, and, accordingly, it is possible to see the drama as endorsing a socially conservative view. Yet to privilege this socially conservative reading solely is to ignore evidence that this play is doing something far more complex than either vindicating or criticising power structures. *A Woman Killed* instead argues more broadly for the necessity of

interrogating judgements, and engages its audience in the process of challenging the conventions according to which patriarchal society functions.

The centrality of judgement in *A Woman Killed* means it is a striking exemplar of the early modern body of texts which have been called ‘equitable drama’. This critical concept, which systematically attempts to explain the relationship between certain dramas and forensic legal processes, accounts for the way the work implicates its audience in a process of judgement and for the way Heywood focuses on representations of the female. My appropriation of the term ‘equitable drama’, which draws chiefly on the criticism of Ina Habermann¹ and the examinations of equity offered by Andrew Majeske and Randall Martin, synthesises two distinct strands of thought. Firstly, it invokes the interventionist notion of ancient Greek and early modern equity. In this specific sense, equity is a concept deriving from Aristotelian *epieikeia* and it describes the practice of intervening in judgements made under laws which are too inflexible to take into account the almost infinite number of variables in each legal case. In early modern England particularly, equity courts (such as the chancery court) provided a form of legal redress to the often inflexible judgements made in the centralised and patriarchally-focused common law courts, which were in the main demonstrably inimical to the female.²

The interventionist power of equity to interrogate judgement, in light of the potential inadequacies and gender biases of conventional common law legal processes, is augmented in my conception of equitable drama by the power of early modern theatre to engender interpretive debate amongst a diverse audience. Equitable drama specifically dwells on the generation of debate and contention via its on-stage representations, and therefore it performatively extends the tenets of equity. According to Habermann,

[equitable drama] neither prejudicates nor preaches, but it presents its interrogative gestures, its “actions of the case”, with great energy and insistence. It offers “images

¹ For a fuller explanation of the notion of ‘equitable drama’, see Ina Habermann, *Staging Slander and Gender in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), and also Ina Habermann, “‘She has that in her belly will dry up your ink’: Femininity as Challenge in the “Equitable Drama” of John Webster”, in *Literature, Politics and Law in Renaissance England* ed. by Erica Sheen and Lorna Hutson (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), pp.100-120.

² For recent examinations of equity as a force of legal and philosophical re-judgement in the ancient and early modern world, see Andrew J. Majeske, *Equity in English Renaissance Literature: Thomas More and Edmund Spenser* (London: Routledge, 2006) and Randall Martin, *Women, Murder, and Equity in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2008).

to think with”, presenting and inviting the polyphony of argument, and therefore no appropriation will be final’.³

Equitable drama has been particularly studied in regards to the female because women in general were actively involved in the early modern equity and ecclesiastical courts which offered an alternative revision of common law. As Martin notes, ‘[t]he popularity of the numerous early modern courts of equity, especially among female litigants, illustrated a widely dispersed desire for fair and practical remedies to common-law restrictions and silences’.⁴ Equitable drama can thus be seen as a representation of a fledging culture of female agency both on and off stage. In showing the female as more than a mere victim or a lustful creature, *A Woman Killed* presents a complex equitable take on gender attuned to the potential inadequacies of patriarchy. More specifically, it is an equitable drama which uses a self-conscious interrogatory method to produce the representations of judgement which kindle debate amongst its audience.

A Woman Killed engages with contentious judgement throughout. The main plot (which I focus on here) details an adulterous affair between Anne Frankford and her lover Wendoll, who is a friend of Anne’s husband John Frankford. This affair is uncovered and ends in death for Anne. Anne, who is banished as a result of what her husband calls his ‘kindness’, commits suicide by self-starvation as a result of the trauma of the banishment. A second plot concerns Sir Charles Mountford and Sir Francis Acton – aristocrats whose feuding results in Sir Charles slaying two of Sir Francis’s servants. This causes the near-ruination of Sir Charles who is imprisoned, and he is only saved when Sir Francis falls in love with Susan Mountford (Charles’s sister) and frees Sir Charles to woo her. In freeing Sir Charles, Sir Francis creates a debt of honour which can only be paid back in full if Sir Charles gifts his unwilling sister Susan to Sir Francis as repayment. Heywood’s representation of the harsh treatment Susan endures is as debatable as Anne’s punishment, and although it is not the chief focus of this paper the sub-plot also questions the wisdom of patriarchy and of judgements made by powerful male characters.

The play begins its examination of the notion of judgement from the outset, in a prologue which initially adopts the guise of apologising for the play’s lack of the

³ Habermann, *Staging Slander*, p.11.

⁴ Martin, *Women, Murder, and Equity*, p.6.

poetic ornamentation which was a hallmark of Renaissance tragedy. Generally, the prologue was seen in the period (as Bruster and Weimann demonstrate) as an authority figure who would offer an authoritative explication of the action whilst attempting to gain the goodwill of the audience.⁵ The prologue of *A Woman Killed* adopts this guiding tone, stating:

I come but like a harbinger, being sent
To tell you what these preparations mean:
Look for no glorious state, our muse is bent
Upon a barren subject, a bare scene.⁶

This prologue has been seen as demanding that the audience take the play's apparent inadequacy into account. Bowers, for example, believes that the prologue is 'conventionally self-deprecating ... [and] clearly pleads for appreciation on a decidedly smaller scale'.⁷ As shall be demonstrated, the 'bare scene' and the 'barren subject' are key ideas in the play, but ultimately I argue they are figured as zones of interpretive potentiality rather than as a straightforward reflection of a deficient starkness.

Contained within its apology for deficiency, the prologue to *A Woman Killed* is making a larger point about the potential interpretive energy within the work. The prologue invites the audience to treat the representation of situations within the play as cases for interpretive opportunity. The play's representation of contestable judgement is figured as operating in complicity with the imaginative engagement of the audience so that the work becomes greater than a drama about an average household. The prologue continues:

We could afford this twig a timber-tree,
Whose strength might boldly on your favours build;
Our russet, tissue; drone, a honey bee;
Our barren plot, a large and spacious field;
Our coarse fare, banquets; our thin water, wine;
Our brook, a sea; our bat's eyes, eagle's sight;
Our poet's dull and earthy muse, divine;
Our ravens, doves; our crow's black feathers, white.
But gentle thoughts, when they may give the foil,

⁵ Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann, *Prologues to Shakespeare's Theatre: Performance and Liminality in Early Modern Drama* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), p.12.

⁶ Thomas Heywood, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, ed. by Brian Scobie (London: A&C Black, 2003), Prologue. 1-4. All further references to the play are taken from this edition, and are given after quotations in the main body of the text.

⁷ Rick Bowers, 'A Woman Killed with Kindness: Plausibility on a Smaller Scale', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 24.2 (1984), 292-306 (p.294).

Save them that yield, and spare where they may spoil.
(Prologue. 5-14.)

As the first two lines of the excerpt show, audience imagination is here the metaphorical root of the 'timber-tree' the play grows into only after interacting with audience interpretation. The subsequent use of contrasting pairings here presents associations whereby the apparent smallness of the play's action actually contains fuller meditations. The prologue requests audience co-operation in altering a barren plot into a large and spacious field, and uses the word 'ours' to suggest joint ownership of the dramatic representations on stage. The prologue here argues, at a crucial inaugural point, that dramatic fullness is created by the interaction between audience imagination and that which the playwright has created.

The prologue thus encourages interpretive co-operation from the spectator, and the audience must interpret a range of situations which are represented throughout the play as a whole. These include: the judging of male friendship as potentially damaging; the examination of the causes of adultery (considering that this infidelity may have mitigating circumstances); an interrogation of the 'kindness' of banishment, and the questioning of the relative lack of consequence for male immorality. Throughout the play, the audience witnesses and must judge the sacrifice of females to ensure maintenance of a morally-ambiguous patriarchal status-quo. Heywood's dramatic representation of Susan Mountford, as has been touched upon already, is a case in point. Having fulfilled her role as an instrument of reconciliation between two morally dubious gentlemen whose feud has threatened to undermine the smooth working of patriarchy, she becomes silent. Susan's objectification is complete: she is forfeited to ensure that, in a world dominated by gentlemanly power networks, Sir Charles can remain noble despite having sold his sister. The play's representation of Susan's innocence, and the way the work dwells on the manipulation she endures, are overwhelming hurdles to reading this conclusion as entirely satisfactory.

The Frankford plot, and Heywood's representation of the treatment of Anne Frankford, is even more consciously constructed to provoke debate amongst the audience. Initially we witness the marriage of John and Anne Frankford, which coincides with the arrival of the mysterious Wendoll. The rapidly established friendship which blossoms between Frankford and Wendoll appears close to

obsession on Frankford's part, whilst Wendoll is exploiting Frankford's wealth to relieve financial hardship as he is 'somewhat pressed by want'. (4. 33) Together, these two gentlemen form an almost symbiotic bond, to the extent that Frankford seemingly neglects his wife. Initially, Frankford claims of Wendoll 'I have preferred him to a second place/In my opinion, and my best regard'. (4. 34-35) Yet soon afterwards, Wendoll notes in awe that Frankford has become incredibly close to him in a short time:

He hath placed me in the height of all his thoughts,
 Made me companion with the best and chiefest
 In Yorkshire. He cannot eat without me,
 Nor laugh without me; I am to his body
 As necessary as his digestion,
 And equally do make him whole or sick.
 (6. 38-43)

This comment suggests that Frankford has placed Wendoll above all others, including Anne, and has raised Wendoll to prominence. Wendoll even notes that this relationship is so close that Frankford needs him in order to function correctly. Crucially this homosocial relationship excludes Anne. The principle of exclusivity which is central to the marriage vow, whereby Anne is supposedly the individual honoured above all others by Frankford, is challenged by Frankford's friendship with Wendoll. McQuade notes:

Frankford invests the relationship [with Wendoll] with the intimacy and affection that Protestant theologians claimed should be devoted to one's spouse [...] By applying this image to friendship, Heywood suggests that, at least for Frankford, this homosocial relationship takes the place of the marriage bond.⁸

The marriage bond is thus seen to be threatened in this play not just by Anne's adultery with Wendoll, but also by Frankford when he places Wendoll in the height of his thoughts. Whereas the adultery between Wendoll and Anne is explicit and is clearly presented to the audience over the entire course of scene 6, the intense relationship fostered between Frankford and Wendoll takes place behind closed doors, fuelling the impression that it may be more than platonic. There are no scenes which deal with the development of the friendship, and instead the work jumps from a scenario whereby Wendoll and Frankford barely know each other to one whereby Frankford in particular is so enamoured of Wendoll that he tells Anne that Wendoll is

⁸ Paula McQuade, "'A Labyrinth of Sin': Marriage and Moral Capacity in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*", *Modern Philology*, 98.2 (2000), 231-250 (p.242).

now to be treated as the master of the house. Anne relates to Wendoll that Frankford has given him leave:

To make bold in his absence and command
 Even as he himself were present in the house,
 For you must keep his table, use his servants,
 And be a present Frankford in his absence.
 (6. 75-78)

Furthermore, this friendship is perhaps one cause of adultery. De Vroom argues that because she has been marginalised, Anne ‘has some cause to be jealous and this in itself is motivation for adultery’.⁹ Anne’s adultery is therefore partially a reaction to an exclusive male relationship and this adds a layer of complexity to the play’s representation of her transgression.

The anxieties surrounding this potentially damaging male friendship centre on Wendoll, and in this regard the common interpretive position shared between the audience and Frankford’s servants (who are both spectators to the adultery) is made explicit. Frankford’s chief servant Nicholas instinctively foreshadows Wendoll as threatening and acts as a device to place the friendship under scrutiny. Whilst alone, suspended in soliloquy before the audience, Nicholas notes: ‘Zounds, I could fight with him, yet know not why./The Devil and he are all one in my eye’. (4. 87-88) At this point another servant (Jenkins) appears to remind Nicholas he has been designated as Wendoll’s manservant. The point of this seemingly groundless outburst is that, although Wendoll has not yet committed any heinous acts, he has been singled out for suspicion by someone who is at a remove from the centre of the play. Preceding audience knowledge of Wendoll’s transgression, this ultimately well-grounded suspicion is a form of dramatic irony which possesses Nicholas with the power of pre-judgement, and his otherwise purely instinctual dislike for Wendoll is refigured as a reaction of a servant against someone who is a genuine threat to his master’s household. As Nicholas leaves the stage, his fellow servant Jenkins remains — and the audience is again spurred on to interaction. Jenkins addresses the audience directly, breaking the illusion of performance:

[To audience] You may see, my masters, though it be
 afternoon with you, ’tis but early days with us, for we

⁹ Theresia De Vroom, ‘Female Heroism in Heywood’s Tragic Farce of Adultery *A Woman Killed With Kindness*’, in *The Female Tragic Hero in English Renaissance Drama*, ed. by Naomi Conn Liebler (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), pp.119-140 (p.131).

have not dined yet. Stay but a little, I'll but go in and help
to bear up the first course and come to you again
presently.
(4. 105-109)

This example of audience address comes at a crucial judgement point when Wendoll is first suspected, and reminds the audience, by reference to the physical and temporal conditions of their spectatorship, of their responsibilities as interpreters of the equitable drama. This rupturing of the immediate fiction of the play also gives the audience a symbolic interlude and affords them the opportunity to reflect on the drama so far. Early modern theatre, in the words of Altman, provided its audience with a space of 'leisured otium' wherein issues could be considered at a remove from the pressures and influences of everyday life.¹⁰ Such space for reflection is a vital element of equitable drama. Jenkins's measured bearing-up of food mirrors the play's presentation of dramatic material which the audience must digest, and in their suspicion towards Wendoll, the servants provide a further link between the play-world and the audience-world which highlights the processes of deliberation and interpretation.

When the suspicion surrounding Wendoll is later confirmed, and the adultery is uncovered, Anne is immediately tackled by an enraged Frankford. His fury fades quickly though and he decides to draw out the deliberation period, declaring:

Stand up, stand up. I will do nothing rashly.
I will retire awhile into my study,
And thou shalt hear thy sentence presently.
(13. 130-132)

Retiring to the occulted male-only zone of the study, to a space of judgement, Frankford banishes Anne with his 'kindness': kindness, apparently, because his judgement is not overtly violent. Upon his return, Frankford declares:

My words are registered in heaven already;
With patience hear me. I'll not martyr thee,
Nor mark thee for a strumpet, but with usage
Of more humility torment thy soul,
And kill thee, even with kindness.
(13. 153-157)

This statement represents Frankford's key moment of judgement in the play, and the judgement is declared to both Anne and the audience. The audience has already seen

¹⁰ Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind* (London: University of California Press, 1978), p.6.

that Frankford's judgement is lacking as he allowed Wendoll into his home and remained oblivious to adultery. The sentence of banishment he passes on Anne is therefore represented in light of his own flaws, as he is implicated in the representations of immorality and human frailty which abound in this text.

The eventual consequences of Frankford's judgement, and the way in which it ignores the wider range of culpability which lies behind the adultery, highlight the potential inadequacies of the pronouncement. Despite Frankford's insistence that his actions are kind, the banishment causes massive psychological trauma to his wife and ends in Anne's death when she decides to starve herself. Through Frankford's judgement, which shifts culpability for the downfall of his household entirely onto his wife, Anne is made an example of in front of the characters in the play-world and the audience. Crucially, however, Anne is afforded the opportunity to address the audience directly regarding her situation:

O, women, women, you that have yet kept
Your holy matrimonial vow unstained,
Make me your instance: when you tread awry,
Your sins like mine will on your conscience lie.
(13. 142-145)

Anne's speech here highlights the manner in which the breaking of the marriage bond has led to misery. Yet in foregrounding the fracturing of the matrimonial vow, Anne also highlights that men are capable of doing this too, and that the female will always be at the mercy of more powerful males in patriarchal societies. Thus, the context of Anne's words is hugely important despite the fact that in their somewhat conventional form they seem only to act as a warning for females who are sinful. The play represents a situation whereby Anne is effectively removed from Frankford's life before the adultery, because she cannot possibly be a part of the intense homosocial bond Frankford and Wendoll share. She transgresses the marriage vow, and as such she must accept some responsibility, but Frankford himself has reneged on his promise to honour Anne excluding all others. After Frankford meets Wendoll, Anne is relegated to the position of a servant who must wait on Wendoll as if he is the master of the house. In a world which only figures the female in relation to her husband, Anne has lost her identity as a wife because Frankford subsumes himself in a relationship with Wendoll at the expense of the marriage bond. Anne is in this sense damned no matter what, and is equally an instance of how the female is always

already marginalised in a patriarchal society. Her adultery is ignoble, but, even before this act of transgression, she was dead in the sense that she was ignored in this patriarchal society.

The contrasting treatment of Wendoll following the adultery highlights a striking gender imbalance. This is again revealed to the audience in soliloquy: as Anne is exiled, Wendoll plots:

And I must now go wander like a Cain
In foreign countries and remotest climes,
Where the report of my ingratitude
Cannot be heard. I'll over, first to France,
And so to Germany, and Italy,
Where, when I have recovered, and by travel
Gotten those perfect tongues, and that these rumours
May in their height abate, I will return.
And I divine, however now dejected,
My worth and parts being by some great man praised,
At my return I may in court be raised.
(16. 127-137)

Wendoll is aware of his 'ingratitude' but this will fade, unlike Anne's transgression. As opposed to Anne, Wendoll is not silenced: his voice will be his salvation - his mastery of languages granting him a new identity abroad before returning to England.¹¹ Here, he can exploit the courtly culture of male gentlemanly advancement by attracting the favour of a powerful courtier and using this to his advantage – and again it is left up to audience imagination which of his 'parts' Wendoll hopes other men will find praiseworthy. Wendoll carries his threat to stability outwards into the post-scriptural future beyond the boundaries of the play text. Wendoll's resonating intimidation highlights the moral concerns Heywood was engaging with, and this menace resurfaces at the terminal point at which homiletic drama should overcome temporary chaos with resolution.

Following the representation of Wendoll's escape, which is in stark contrast to the ordeal endured by Anne, Frankford's final lines also highlight the ambiguous treatment of his wife. Frankford says of the epitaph he shall grant her:

¹¹ Nancy A. Gutierrez, *'Shall She Famish Then?': Female Food Refusal in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p.48. The author here notes the courtliness and foreignness of Wendoll's destination adds to his complex association with the diabolical, stating: 'Wendoll leaves the pastoral countryside of England for the courts of Europe, exchanging rural innocence for courtly decadence and corruption, and reinforcing his association with the devil.' It is not just important that Wendoll is escaping punishment: the manner in which he escapes it, and his post-scriptural plans, are also highly significant.

[...] on her grave
I will bestow this funeral epitaph,
Which on her marble tomb shall be engraved.
In golden letters shall these words be filled:
Here lies she whom her husband's kindness killed.
(17. 136-140)

Even in death, Anne is defined by her relationship to her husband and not by name. The written word seemingly ensures lasting authorial control by Frankford over Anne's identity, but the epitaph also highlights Frankford's complicity to the audience – Anne is not just killed with kindness, but by the kindness of her husband.¹² Frankford's epitaph ensures his cruelty is memorialised – the epitaph also records him as a murderer. The play's motif of contestable judgement is thus terminally reinforced with this examination of the supposed kindness of Frankford's actions. The doubts about the fairness of Frankford's punishment are re-invoked for audience judgement. As Panek argues:

Whether or not the action [of the play] [...] upholds these humane and "gentle" standards is left for each viewer, each reader to decide [...] Heywood fully expected a multiplicity of responses.¹³

Panek's assertion that Heywood expected a multiplicity of responses is compelling. Frankford hopes that his epitaph will bring an end to the episode of adultery and dishonour, but this is not the case. Instead of the closure a headstone conventionally denotes, this is an epitaph which (fittingly for the play it inhabits) reignites the question of interpretation.

The play's engagement with audience interpretation continues even beyond this, marking it as a truly equitable work which revels in its deconstruction of the mechanics of audience judgement. The complexities of interpretation are further amplified in the epilogue. Voiced by an epilogue figure it tells an allegorical tale, whereby: 'An honest crew, disposed to be merry,/Came to a tavern by and called for wine'. (Epilogue. 1-2) Then a single wine is tasted by the five men who comprise this honest crew, resulting in diverse reactions. Some enjoy the wine, whereas others find fault, leading the epilogue voice to comment: 'Thus, gentlemen, you see how in one

¹² David Cook, 'A Woman Killed with Kindness: An Unshakespearian Tragedy', *English Studies*, 45 (1964), 353-372 (p.363). Cook here also charges Frankford with 'knowing the significance of having killed the thing he loves'.

¹³ Jennifer Panek, 'Punishing Adultery in a Woman Killed with Kindness', *Studies in English Literature 1500 – 1900 Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, 34.2 (1994), 357-378 (p.375).

hour/The wine was new, old, flat, sharp, sweet, and sour'.(Epilogue. 11-12) The epilogue's five rowdy gentlemen, who are licentiously and noisily guzzling wine, contrast with the self-starvation and silence of the emaciated Anne. This is the final representation of how male control of the food supply is a fundamental part of gentlemanly power over the female.¹⁴ More specifically, the placement of the epilogue in a tavern is important — just as the play shows the female ignored, so too is the epilogue a male-only zone.¹⁵ With the epilogue, the harrowing events just witnessed are followed by drunken gallants within a male-only space of privileged judgement where interpretation is trivialised to an argument about wine. This reflects, as the play does, how the damage suffered by the female in the relentless perpetuation of patriarchy can be ignored by male-only groups. Furthermore, this episode of judgement also reminds the audience, by contrast, of the responsibility which attends their position as alert and engaged judges of the play's performative representations.

The epilogue then concludes by explaining further why the wine-tasting episode is relevant to the drama:

Unto this wine we do allude our play,
Which some will judge too trivial, some too grave.
You, as our guests, we entertain this day
And bid you welcome to the best we have.
Excuse us, then; good wine may be disgraced
When every several mouth hath sundry taste.
(Epilogue. 13-18)

This reflection on how one product can be interpreted in a hugely diverse manner concludes the play. What is highlighted is not fear that the play can be damaged by multiple interpretations, but rather that this is not something to be feared. The audience is welcomed and compelled to draw their own equitable conclusions from a range of conflicting representations of patriarchy. The epilogue, the play's epitaph, functions to foreground ambiguity just like Anne's epitaph and its stressing of the inescapability of multiple interpretations empowers multiple readings.

¹⁴ Christopher Frey and Leanne Lieblein, "'My breasts sear'd': The Self-Starved Female Body and *A Woman Killed with Kindness*", *Early Theatre*, 7.1 (2004), 45-66 (p.47). The authors of this piece here argue that Anne's actions are a response to 'a patriarchal society in which food and eating are forms of control'.

¹⁵ A. Lynn Martin, *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), p.61. Martin here notes that '[d]rinking establishments were predominantly male space and centers for male sociability'.

In the epilogue this so-called ‘barren’ drama makes a comment on the inevitable interpretive plurality which drama provokes in its audience, and demonstrates how this can provide an insight into the experience of marginalised figures. Accordingly, the epilogue reinforces the argument that this play is an equitable drama which offers its audience the chance to deliberate on judgements which centre on the treatment of the female in a patriarchal society. In extending dramatic judgement out into the audience, the epilogue and the play in general argue that drama can interrogate and spark debate more successfully than it can preach and reinforce norms. From prologue to epilogue therefore, and at key points of direct audience engagement in between, *A Woman Killed with Kindness* foregrounds the complex interpretive relationship between audience and performance in the powerfully interrogative equitable drama of early modern England.

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