

***“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 *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603) directly singles out its audiences and demands their participation in the process of interpreting the work’s myriad (and contentious) judgements – which centre for the most part on the female. The apparently ‘kind’ punishment of the adulteress Anne Frankford at the hands of her husband, and the sacrifice of Susan Mountford in a patriarchal power exchange, form the nucleus of a dramatic work which questions the basis of a male-centric society. This self-awareness of audience interpretation is conspicuous both in the play-text proper, (which features direct appeals to the audience alongside a marked reliance on the performative potential of dramatic irony), and in the textual/performative apparatus of stage orations which liminally introduce and conclude the play.

The play foregrounds the centrality of audience interpretation and its power to enrich a play text with various significances and possibly competing truths. I therefore argue that this play is an excellent case study to highlight the nature of early modern drama as form which, broadly, thrives upon the energy granted by interpretive grey areas and the resulting debates amongst audiences these can generate. To use Margot Heinemann’s phrase, this play offers its audiences ‘images to think with’ and as such I argue that it can be seen as a prime example of dynamic and potentially subversive ‘equitable drama’ rather than as a straightforward example of homiletic and socially-conservative ‘domestic tragedy’. Drawing, as many early modern female litigants did, on the inherently interventionist and adversarial legal precept of equity (or *epieikeia*) as a form of re-interpretation and potential empowerment, I argue that this play invites its audience to imagine alternatives to the inflexible patriarchy represented in its fiction.