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Divorcing Kin and Kind: Selective Generosity in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*

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CLAUDIUS: And now my cousin Hamlet and my son -
HAMLET: A little more than kin and less than kind.

*Hamlet* 1.2.64-65

1. In his first encounter with Hamlet, Claudius, the newly-appointed King of Denmark, attempts to define the altered relationship between his nephew and himself. His efforts result in an act of dual-naming, in which Hamlet is referred to as both the king's nephew and, by virtue of Claudius's marriage to Gertrude, his son. By invoking the ties that bind uncle and nephew as well as those that join father and son, Claudius’ speech draws attention to the multiple allegiances between the two characters. The monarch’s words implicate both uncle and nephew in a set of binary ties – kinship and kindness – to which Hamlet alludes in his rejoinder. In Tudor and Stuart England, the words were virtually interchangeable so that, along with expressing personality traits like benevolence, kindness implied “The quality, condition, or fact of being related by birth or descent; kinship, relationship, consanguinity”. [1] In this context, Hamlet’s response offers a clear challenge to the spirit of consanguinity evoked by his uncle. By refusing to confirm his affiliation with Claudius, the prince alludes to a profoundly disjointed family structure in which kinship is no longer synonymous with kind behavior. Thus, while his “uncle-father” emphasizes the ties that bind them to each other, Hamlet focuses on the impossibility of such a union (2.2.358).

2. Written in the same decade as *Hamlet*, Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607) illustrates a similar rupture between kinship and kindness, but unlike its tragic predecessor, Heywood’s drama focuses on the social rather than the psychic divisions among its protagonists. [2] In the domestic tragedy, prominent members of the Yorkshire nobility and gentry engage in a futile quest to discharge their customary duties towards their neighbors, retainers, and female kin. In the text’s main plot, the affluent landowner, John Frankford, displays his liberality by inviting an impoverished gentleman, Wendoll, to share his home and possessions. In the subsidiary plot, the prosperous knight, Sir Charles Mountford, demonstrates his largesse by engaging in a hawking match with his chief rival in wealth and status, Sir Francis Acton. However, instead of being repaid for their generosity, both men are penalized for their actions. Frankford’s kindness is poorly reciprocated by Wendoll, who enters into an adulterous relationship with his wife, Anne. Likewise, Sir Charles’s munificence results in the loss of his fortune to his rival and subsequent neglect by his friends. But
rather than be vanquished by their troubles, the householders redeem themselves by renouncing their former prodigality and asserting better control over their kin. Frankford surmounts the shame of being cuckolded through Wendoll’s exile and Anne’s death, while Sir Charles regains his gentle standing upon his sister, Susan’s, marriage to his chief rival. The landowners’ deliverance takes place in tandem with their formation of an alliance with Sir Francis, who is Anne’s brother as well as Susan’s future husband. The emergence of this new kinship network suggests that the primary threat to domestic harmony in the play lies in the protagonists’ attitude towards hospitality.

3. In the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, the prosperity of the manorial estate depended on the landlord’s ability to fulfill a host of private and public duties. These duties were enshrined in the term “domestic” which could be used to reference both “family affairs” and issues “pertaining to one’s own country or nation; not foreign, internal, inland, ‘home’” (Oxford English Dictionary). In addition to serving the needs of the immediate family, then, the manorial estate acted as an important nucleus for the congregation of neighbors, distant relations, and servants. The broader ramifications of domesticity certainly inform recent studies of A Woman Killed, which locate the drama’s primary conflict in the dissonance between the sexual and social obligations placed on its main characters. In “Domestic Tragedy and Private Life,” Viviana Comensoli writes that the text responds to anxieties regarding “the dissolution of the contemporary household” (66). On a related note, Diana Henderson posits that it is shaped by bourgeois fears about the disappearance of “old codes of honor” in the face of increasing social mobility (“The Theater” 187). But even though most investigations of the drama agree that it illustrates fissures in the household economy, they differ as to where these fissures occur and how they unfold. According to Lena Cowen Orlin, the Frankford and Mountford plots depict the collapse of male friendship in the face of a new ethos of competition, which prioritizes the landowners’ protection of their property and female kin over their relationship with each other. (Private Matters 137-38). Similarly, in her discussion of Frankford, Anne Christensen suggests that the landowner’s departure from home at critical junctures in the play reflects his inability to reconcile his marital and business interests. Within this framework, the two main households are destabilized by the intrusion of private economic interests upon the realms of friendship and marriage.

4. The fragmentation of Frankford’s and Sir Charles’s households is further complicated by the differences in their social standing. As the owner of “three or four” manor houses, Frankford is a representative of the upwardly-mobile gentry, whose emphasis on attending to business is at odds with the aristocratic pursuit of hawking and hunting in which Sir Charles and Sir Francis indulge (16.8, 1.93-95). In this context, Richard Hillman posits that Frankford’s bourgeois sobriety serves as an important contrast to the unrestrained competitiveness between the two knights, an attitude for which he “will be granted the privilege of regenerating the aristocracy itself” (88). Whereas Hillman views Frankford as enabling a return to traditional class positions, Lynn Bennett suggests that the play condemns both the gentry and the nobility. In her estimation, the upwardly-mobile Frankford tries to improve his standing by entering the realm of “symbolic capital” through his marriage to Anne. In contrast, the well-born but rapidly impoverished Sir Charles attempts to gain “actual capital” through Susan’s marriage with Sir Francis. For Bennett, the text ultimately condemns the “homsocial economies” in which both the male characters engage because of its dependence on an “inherently immoral” exchange in women. While Hillman and Bennett help qualify those studies that treat the drama’s major landowners as a homogenous group, they also perpetuate the argument that Heywood portrays the collapse of the traditional domestic order in A Woman Killed.

5. In contrast, I suggest that the drama chronicles the flaws in theories of bourgeois hospitality and aristocratic chivalry in order to propagate a new bourgeois-aristocratic alliance between Frankford, Sir Charles, and Sir Francis. Thus, Frankford’s betrayal by Wendoll serves as a warning against his former liberality and allows him to strengthen his ties with his brother-in-law. Likewise, the financial crisis precipitated by Sir Charles’s recklessness is dissolved upon his reconciliation with his former rival. Moreover, the partnership between Frankford and Sir Francis, on the one hand, and Sir Charles and Sir Francis, on the other, is cemented by the exclusion of female relations and male neighbors
from within their ranks. Instead of emphasizing the erosion of male friendship or marital harmony, I maintain that the play champions a new ethos of selective generosity that unites its male protagonists by dissolving the social and economic differences between them.[9]

6. The discriminatory kindness embraced at the drama’s conclusion is a far cry from the inclusive nature of the marriage celebrations at its beginning. As the host of the festivities, Frankford is encouraged to “go cheer your guests” in order to avoid accusations of “unkindness,” a charge that he takes to heart in his later encounters with Wendell (1.75, 78). Like Frankford, Sir Charles confirms his gentle status at the nuptial banquet by challenging Sir Francis to the hawking match. Their behavior at the wedding indicates that both men wish to exert “good lordship,” which Lawrence Stone defines as “a reciprocal exchange of patronage, support, and hospitality in return for attendance, deference, respect, advice and loyalty” (Family 89).[10] The exertion of “good lordship” confirms the property owners’ importance within an extensive kinship network where their most visible function was the display of generosity. As Felicity Heal notes, such behavior was “perceived as a household activity, emanating from the domus and concerned with the dispensing of those goods best afforded by it – food, drink, and accommodation” (67). Like Chaucer’s Franklin, whose table showed “mete and drynke,” the landlord was celebrated for providing shelter to a wide variety of recipients (345). At the same time, Heal observes that “largesse, which has been identified as the queen of medieval virtues, remained a prime characteristic of the lord or knight long after it had lost much of its early political significance” (69). While this pattern of manorial giving may have been successful in the feudal context for which it was designed, its dependence upon the exchange of material goods by the lord for the abstract payment of fidelity from his retainers was increasingly obsolete within an early-modern economic landscape.

7. In spite of debates regarding the actual value of hospitality, its symbolic significance is emphasised by contemporary domestic manuals, such as Thomas Tusser’s *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* (1585), where the author advises the householder: “Of all other doings, housekeeping is cheefe,/ For dailie it helpeth, the poore with releeve:/ The neighbor the stranger, and all that have need/ which causeth thy dooings, the better to speed” (55). Writing almost a century after Tusser, George Wheler offers a similarly-laudatory portrait of hospitality in *The Protestant Monastery* (1698) where he describes it as “a Liberal Entertainment of all sorts of Men, at ones House, whether Neighbours or Strangers, with Kindness, especially with Meat, Drink, and Lodgings” (173). For Tusser and Wheler, liberality is an important Christian virtue that should be extended to all comers, regardless of their position on the social hierarchy.

8. In addition to being a manifestation of “good lordship,” public largesse was considered “the particular prerogative of gentlemen and one of the most visible manifestations of true, that is inner, nobility” (Heal 73). But despite the close association of generosity and gentility, by the seventeenth century, the term “kindness” was also being used to denote “The manner or way natural or proper to any one” (Oxford English Dictionary). Whereas munificence was initially synonymous with lineage, it increasingly came to represent a form of liberality within which a person’s birth was irrelevant. The expanding definition of gentility is certainly evident in the nuptial festivities with which the play commences, where the upwardly-mobile Frankford proves just as skilled at wielding “good lordship” as the knightly Sir Charles. In its opening scene, Heywood’s text represents “kindness” as a standard to which both men can subscribe.

9. The term’s growing malleability takes place in tandem with a decrease in its value as an indicator of gentility. Sir Thomas Smith attests to this trend in *De Republica Anglorum* (1583), which begins by adhering to the traditional description of gentlemen as “those whom their bloud and their race make noble and knowen,” but adds the caveat that ancestry can also resemble “a thing once gilted, though it be copper within, till the gilt be worn away” (34). In Smith’s estimation, gentility of birth cannot sustain itself over several generations and should, therefore, be subordinate to gentility of virtue. He contends, “as the husbandman hath to plant a newe tree where the olde faileth, so hath the Prince to
honor vertue where he doth finde it, to make gentlemen, esquires, knights, barons, earles, marquises, and dukes, where he seeth vertue able to beare that honor or merits, and deserves it” (36). In De Republica, Smith offers a conventional homage to the nobility, but also qualifies this description by suggesting that virtuous behavior is just as laudable as gentle birth. The shifting definition of gentility is certainly evident in the celebration surrounding Frankford’s marriage to Anne, which allow the groom to demonstrate his social parity with his peers.

10. Frankford’s seamless ascension of the social ladder is evident in Sir Charles’ compliment at the wedding: “There’s equality/ In this fair combination” (1.65-67). His words echo the 1563 Homily on Matrimony, which advocates: “married persons must apply their minds in most earnest wise to concord and must crave continually of God the helpe of his holy Spirit, so to rule their hearts, and to knit their minds together, that they be not disseeded by any division of discord” (Rickey and Stroup 240).[11] Even though the union between Frankford and Anne subscribes to the Homily’s description of marriage as mutual concord, its apparent harmony is threatened when Sir Charles follows his encomium by praising Frankford’s victory over his male rivals. In this reading, Anne becomes a prize “Only found by yours, though many a heart hath sought her” (1.25). Since women are notably absent from the wedding party, Anne’s primary role in this context is to connect the drama’s male protagonists who either participate in a battle over her hand or in a contest to praise her “pliant and duteous” nature (1.42). Despite the idealized portrait of equality provided at the inception of this scene, the competition to which it gives rise suggests that the wedding does produce anxieties about Frankford’s rise in a hierarchy that was previously dominated by Sir Charles and Sir Francis.[12]

11. Along with laying claim to the noble ancestry of his fellow-landowners through his marriage to Anne, Frankford establishes his gentle status by inviting Wendoll to enjoy his home and possessions. In giving Wendoll an equal share in his “table and purse”, Frankford provides a dramatic rendition of the popular proverb, “to kill with kindness,” a reference to the bounty that a host was customarily expected to shower upon his guests (4.63).[13] Along with mirroring the standards of virtuous behavior laid out in early-modern domestic manuals, Frankford’s benevolence resembles the images of generosity that were a staple of the seventeenth-century country house poems. In one of the most important representations of the genre, Ben Jonson’s To Penshurst (1616), the manorial estate is idealized as a utopia of charitable dispensation, “whose liberal board doth flow/ With all that hospitality doth know” (59-60). But as Raymond Williams argues, instead of providing an accurate representation of rural existence, Jonson’s vision of plenitude offers “an idealization of actual country life and its social and economic relations” (26).[14] According to Williams, such portrayals deliberately excise the laborers who enabled the householder’s bounteousness towards his guests. The genre consequently erases social conflict by relegating the poor and indigent to the threshold of the manorial estate; while they are greeted at its boundaries, they are never allowed to set foot within its precincts.

12. However, in A Woman Killed, the lines separating wealthy lord and poor supplicant are far less absolute. By giving Wendoll unrestricted access to his possessions, the landlord exceeds the framework of the country house narrative by failing to distinguish between benefactor and recipient. [15] In his study of the word host and its Latin roots, hospes and hospitis, Daryl Palmer notes that: “the single term host signifies both host and guest. Hosting means both the offering and the receiving of hospitality” (3). In Heywood’s text, the householder imagines a similar fusion of host and guest when he appoints Wendoll “a present Frankford in his absence,” but his gift is ambiguous in that it can be read as an invitation to enjoy his wife as well as his possessions (6.77). [16] Frankford’s refusal to demarcate the boundaries between them suggests that Wendoll is free to include Anne amongst the household goods to which he has access. As Lena Orlin points out, their affair demonstrates “the fear of a house that is too open, penetrable by and hospitable to any number of disorderly and masterless men” (Private Matters 8). When Wendoll betrays his benefactor by deliberately misinterpreting his words, he metamorphoses from an honored guest to a “disorderly and masterless” man and, as such, makes a strong case against the future disbursement of kindness to his
neighors.

13. A similar warning against generosity can be found in the seventeenth-century literature on household governance. In *A Chaine of Graces* (1622), his essay on the importance of “Brotherly-kindnesse,” Cornelius Burges describes “charitie” as “love contracted, and limited to those who best deserve it” (178-79). Burges maintains that kindness must be accorded to members of one’s family before it is extended to strangers, so that “A man may love a gratious man, as a gratious man, more then him that is ungratious; but one may not love a gratious man better then a husband or a wife considered in these relations” (245-46). While Burges emphasizes the importance of charitable behavior, he insists on its relegation to near rather than extended kin. In this context, even an advocate of hospitality like George Wheler warns his readers that it should “be used in a Christian manner, provided, it do not degenerate into Ostenation, Prodigality, Luxury, or Debauchery. It must be Liberality without Prodigality, and may be Frugality without stingy Covetousness” (172-73). For Wheler, such benevolence entails the following of a golden mean between unrestrained giving, on the one hand, and extreme restraint, on the other. Like Burges, he is in favor of regulating a tradition of hospitality that had once been open to all comers.

14. Just as seventeenth-century writings on domesticity drew attention to the problems of unrestrained kindness, a substantial body of pamphlet literature from the period highlighted the dangers of opening one’s doors to an unworthy guest. In the period between 1550 and 1600, tracts like John Awdeley’s *A Fraternity of Vagabonds* (1561); Thomas Harman’s *A Caveat for Cursitors* (1566) and Robert Greene’s *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage* (1591), cautioned their readers against offering assistance to strangers (Kinney). Collectively known as “rogue literature,” the goal of these pamphlets was to draw attention to the methods used by vagrants -- those who lacked an established source of employment or a steady income -- to defraud respectable citizens of their hard-earned wages. In order to drive home their point, the texts exaggerated the gullibility of the victims and the inherent criminality of their attackers. Robert Copland’s pamphlet, *Highway to the Spital-House* (1536), provides an important instance of the rogue-literary dictum against sympathizing with strangers. Centered round a conversation between the author and the Porter of a spital or hospital -- a public shelter for the homeless -- the text highlights the drawbacks of charity. Copland informs his interlocutor: “Me thynk that therin ye do no right/ Nor all suche pl aces of/ hospytalyte / To con fort p eo pl e of suche iniquyte” (3). The narrator generates suspicion about the shelter’s inhabitants by suggesting that their pleas for aid are entirely fraudulent. Since the spital’s authorities cannot distinguish between true and false pleas for aid, Copland advises against providing any assistance at all.

15. Heywood’s text offers a similar warning against showing kindness to strangers by emphasizing Wendoll’s failure to reciprocate the gifts that have been bestowed upon him. This is illustrated in Frankford’s chastisement of Wendoll after he discovers his affair with Anne, which focuses on his ingratitude rather than his adultery. The landlord states:

> When thou recordest my many courtesies  
> And shalt compare them with thy treacherous heart  
> Lay them together, weigh them equally  
> ’Twill be revenge enough. (13.71-74)

The host reasons that, since his “many courtesies” outbalance Wendoll’s act of betrayal, the treacherous guest will owe him in excess of what he can rightly pay, and his consciousness of this debt will be a sufficient penalty for his crime. Despite the gravity of Wendoll’s crime, the generosity of Frankford’s sentence is evident if we consider that, in the context of social punishments for adultery, the landlord chooses the least punitive of the options available to him. As David Underdown outlines, there existed a variety of communal rituals that could be used to deal with sexual offenses, such as the practices of skimmington and charivari, which could be employed against cuckolded
husbands, adulterous wives, or their lovers (123-30). In the face of these alternatives, Frankford’s verdict prioritizes his guest’s desecration of an economic exchange over his violation of a marital norm.

16. In his rare moments of repentance, Wendell upholds the landlord’s vision of his actions. Even though he laments his part in divorcing “the truest turtles/ That ever lived together,” Wendell’s regret for his breach of hospitality trumps his anxiety about his violation of marital norms (16.46-47). Thus, he repeatedly describes himself as “a villain and a traitor to his friend” and fears being stigmatized as an “ingrate” for his behavior; in both cases, Wendell focuses on his despoliation of his host’s reputation rather than his marriage (6.25, 43). However, these expressions of remorse are short-lived and fail to vindicate Frankford’s sentence. Even though Wendell compares his isolation to that of the wandering Cain, the erstwhile guest ultimately rallies his spirits and hopes to meet with an equally-generous benefactor in the future, claiming: “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” (16.132-34). Wendell’s desire for advancement is spurred by Frankford’s generosity; instead of merely sojourning in a manor house, he hopes to achieve greater recognition at court. Far from illustrating the positive effects of kindness, Wendell’s conduct emphasizes the dangers of household familiarity. As a result, Heywood’s depiction of the encounter between a willing host and an unworthy guest advocates for the closing rather than the opening of doors to strangers.

17. Unlike Wendell, whose danger can be nullified by his banishment, Anne presents a much greater threat to the sanctity of the home because she is always positioned within its boundaries rather than at its threshold. Accordingly, in his punishment of her, Frankford must seek not only to redeem his reputation but also to inoculate his household from future peril. In keeping with this goal, he expels Anne from their home and bars her access to his children. He informs his wife:

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. (13.152-55)

Since he eschews public shaming in favor of private discipline, Frankford’s behavior has the appearance of largesse. Nonetheless, in the context of Anne’s subsequent death, her husband’s desire to “kill with kindness,” offers a literal and highly sinister instantiation of the popular proverb. As Karen Newman points out, psychological punishments could be just as cruel as physical ones, since they functioned as “a form of social regulation ... not a sentimental recognition of the importance of domestic affairs or heterosexual relations” (25). Far from suggesting any generosity of spirit on Frankford’s part, Anne’s banishment is informed by a similar desire to regulate the process of her atonement. Exiled to one of her husband’s manor houses and subject to surveillance by his servants, Anne is placed at a purely symbolic distance from her spouse. Able to send her missives of chastisement and supplied with regular reports on her behavior, Frankford’s vigilance over his wife transfers easily to the site of her exile.

18. Moreover, Frankford’s choice of sentence indicates that Anne’s failure to adhere to her social responsibilities may be a greater crime than her betrayal of her marriage vows. In Gunatkeion (1624), his manual on the history of women, Heywood posits that, “Aristotle conferres the cares and businesses that lie abroad, upon the husband, but the domesticke actions within doores, he assignes to the wife; for he holds it as inconuenient and vncomely for the wife to busie herselues about any publike affaires” (180). In his text, Heywood suggests that a wife’s primary duty lies in the successful management of her husband’s property. But as Natasha Korda indicates, female supervision of the household was always fraught with potential difficulties “for a wife who took a proprietary interest in her household stuff might not only keep it for herself, but give it away to a lover” (79). Because women were charged with the guardianship of the home, any sign of sexual impropriety
within its precincts would have been viewed as an indication of carelessness towards “household stuff.” Through her liaison with Wendoll, Anne violates her domestic responsibilities as well as her nuptial bonds. Consequently, her banishment is as much a warning against her lax supervision of the home as it is a sentence for adultery.

19. At the same time, Anne does not bear sole responsibility for the disintegration of the household; we must also take into account her husband’s part in its collapse. Like Anne, whose chief duty was to protect her household goods, Frankford’s primary function as a householder was to fulfill his communal obligations. The landowner’s inability to do so is evident in his refusal to mediate in the quarrel that arises between Sir Francis and Sir Charles. On first being informed of their disagreement at the hawking match, Frankford admits that he is “sorry” for Sir Charles, who will be “most severely censured on” but, instead of intervening in the matter, he turns to the harbinger of this news -- Wendoll -- and offers him financial assistance (4.60-61). Moreover, when he is asked to speak with his brother-in-law on Sir Charles’ behalf, Frankford confesses that “more weighty business of my own” prevents his brokering a cessation of hostilities (11.28). Here, Frankford’s “weighty business” is his quest to gain concrete proof regarding Wendoll’s illicit liaison with Anne. In both instances, the landlord’s invitation to Wendoll presents an obstacle against the fulfillment of his economic obligations.

20. Though Anne’s adultery may have been the catalyst for the breakdown of domestic harmony, Frankford’s allegiance to a code of unstinting hospitality serves as its underlying cause. Even Wendoll questions the motives behind his host’s benevolence, claiming: “I never bound him to me by desert/ Of a mere stranger, a poor gentleman/ A man by whom in no kind he could gain” (6.34-36). Unlike Frankford, his guest understands hospitality as a system that entails some degree of reciprocity. Despite his status as a gentleman, albeit an impoverished one, Wendoll observes that, “His kindness grows of no alliance ‘twixt us” (6.32). For Wendoll, his gentle birth proves insufficient for bridging the fiscal gap between his host and himself. His anxieties draw attention to an alternative perspective for understanding social relations in the play. As David Cressy illustrates, the system of kinship involved a range of possibilities that “began with acknowledgment, advice and support, stretched to financial help and career encouragement, and also included emotional comfort and political solidarity” (49). In Cressy’s estimation, kinship represented a form of “interdependence and mutual obligation” rather than a one-sided financial transaction (47). Within this framework, Frankford’s provision of concrete favors in return for the abstract reward of gratitude emphasizes rather than erases the financial disparities between donor and recipient. In A Woman Killed, the disastrous effects of Frankford’s altruism illustrate the drawbacks of adhering strictly to an outdated model of “good lordship.”

21. While unrestrained giving is vilified in the play, the text does not condemn all forms of social exchange between men. Instead, it replaces the uneven Frankford-Wendoll relationship with an alliance between Frankford and Sir Francis that is based on economic similitude rather than difference. On Anne’s deathbed, the knight commends his brother-in-law for his success in compelling her repentance and emphasizes their continued association in spite of her loss:

Oh, Master Frankford, all the near alliance
I lose by her shall be supplied in thee
You are my brother by the nearest way
Her kindred hath fallen off, but yours doth stay. (17.99-102)

In his belief that the loss of a sister can be overcome and even improved upon by the acquisition of a “brother by the nearest way,” Sir Francis privileges fraternal affinities over the claims of shared ancestry. While Anne’s marriage to Frankford initiated the ties between them, her death acts as a far stronger tool for binding the landowners to each other. Indeed, the dead Anne is a more desirable vehicle for their friendship than the living one, since she can no longer threaten the inviolability of
either her husband’s or her brother’s household. Her demise thus allows Frankford and Sir Francis to create a bourgeois-aristocratic partnership that is based on the possibility of mutual assistance rather than on ties of blood. Most importantly, the alliance provides Frankford with an opportunity to disavow his practice of unrestrained generosity, since his brother-in-law has no need of his wealth.

22. A similar warning against unrestricted giving informs the Mountford plot, where Sir Charles faces imprisonment and penury, despite having provided amply for his tenants and relations. Like Frankford, whose initial demonstration of kindness takes place at a communal celebration, Sir Charles’ first display of largesse occurs at the hawking competition between Sir Francis and himself, an event that is supposed to extend the camaraderie of the nuptial festivities. Set at “chevy chase” — a metaphorical reference to a fourteenth-century border skirmish between the earls of Northumberland and Douglas — the location for their match evokes the feudal landscape of the original battle (1.95). [24] According to Diana Henderson, the choice of backdrop emphasizes Sir Charles’s adherence to “an anachronistic code of chivalric honor” that is out of keeping with the contest in which he is engaged (284). As opposed to the late-medieval earls, whose heroism was celebrated in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, Sir Charles and Sir Francis are reduced to exchanging insults about their hunting animals. [25] When Sir Francis observes, “Your dogs are trundle-tails and curs,” his rival offers the corresponding slur: “You keep not a good hound in all your kennel/ Nor one good hawk upon your perch” (3.29, 31). In their exchange, the knights locate each others’ worth in the quality of their kennels, a strategy that domesticates the chivalric landscape within which the original battle was cast. The dissonance between the feudal past and the quotidian present is heightened when Sir Charles kills his rival’s falconer and huntsman. Unlike the medieval heroes whose retainers died alongside them, the knight is deserted by his former allies and made to pay a severe financial penalty for his actions. Even though the contest was supposed to demonstrate Sir Charles’s aristocratic credentials, its catastrophic results illustrate the dangers of his prodigal behavior.

23. Sir Charles’s economic woes are intensified by the failure of his extensive network of cousins and retainers to aid him once he is transformed into “a plain countryman” by the dispersal of his fortune (5.8). When his sister, Susan, is delegated to plead with their relations for assistance on his behalf, she is rebuffed rather than treated to the “melting charity” and “moving ruth” that Sir Charles expects from his kin (10.38). His cousin, Tydy, informs her:

I say this comes of roisting, swaggering
Call me not cousin; each man for himself
Some men are born to mirth and some to sorrow
I am no cousin unto them that borrow. (9.33-36)

Instead of fulfilling his social obligations towards his kinsman, Tydy suggests that Sir Charles’ destitution is self-inflicted. For him, the knight’s condition is the natural result of favoring a neo-feudal lifestyle of “roisting” and “swaggering” over one of thrift. Tydy’s denial demonstrates the impossibility of creating a kinship network between those that save and “then that borrow.” His refusal to assist Sir Charles provides the same lesson against unrestrained generosity that Frankford is compelled to learn after his disastrous alliance with Wendoll.

24. Most importantly, Tydy’s use of the term “cousin” in his speech offers an important illustration of the multiple and often-contradictory definitions of gentility in the period. Employed in Claudius’s conversation with Hamlet as well as Tydy’s denial of Sir Charles, the term was interchangeable with the word “kinsman,” and was used to designate a wide variety of familial relationships in the Renaissance.[26] At the same time, the term was increasingly associated with the rogue-literary invention, “cozen,” which was first employed in John Aweley’s popular pamphlet, The Fraternity of Vagabonds (1561), and later used to denote any kind of fraudulent or deceitful behavior. In keeping with its broader equation with deceit, the practice of “cousinage” referred specifically to the claiming of kindred for pecuniary gain. This restructuring of familial relations certainly informs George
Wither’s exclamation in *Britain’s Remembrancer* (1628): “The brother to the brother growes a stranger. There is no kin, but Cousnage.”[27] In this context, Tydy’s belief in “each man for himself” echoes the dual meaning of the word. Accordingly, while Susan and Sir Charles emphasize the genealogical ties between them, Tydy interprets their appeal as an attempt to defraud him in the name of kinship.

25. The popular fear of being vulnerable to financial schemers is also expressed by the rest of Sir Charles’s acquaintances in their responses to Susan’s pleas. As with her futile appeal to Tydy, Susan petitions one of his former retainers for money by reminding him of her brother’s generosity: “You, Master Roder, were my brother’s tenant/ Rent-free he placed you in that wealthy farm/ Of which you are possessed” (9.26-28). By drawing attention to her brother’s bestowal of a “rent-free” living to his lessee, Susan appeals to the landlord’s customary right to expect reciprocal loyalty from his tenant. In the context of *A Woman Killed*, Sir Charles’ benevolence towards Roder was supposed to bind them both within an unwritten economy of exchange. However, his former tenant not only denies the existence of this network of aid, but also insists that it is the duty of property owners like Sir Francis “that have hurled him in” to help Sir Charles remit his dues (9.31). By failing to adequately recompense his former landlord’s liberality, Roder suggests that Sir Charles should invest his money more wisely in the future.

26. This lesson is driven home in the manner by which Sir Charles secures his release from prison. Abandoned by his friends, the knight finds a benefactor in Shafton, a wealthy landowner who loans him five hundred pounds in what appears to be a charitable gesture. But instead of signifying his kindness, the money comes with definite strings attached. As Shafton confesses in an aside, his largesse is motivated by a desire for personal “gain and pleasure” (5.53). In exchange for the loan, the landlord demands Sir Charles’s last remaining property, a manor house, which he wishes to own, “Since it lies/ So near a lordship that I lately bought, I would fain buy it of you” (italics mine 7.13-15). Unlike the belief in hereditary kindness that is invoked by Sir Charles and Susan, Shafton’s statement highlights his ability to buy both property and status. His equation of gentility and wealth is evident when he frees Sir Charles from debt with the boast: “Tush, let Frank Acton/ Wage with knighthood-like expense with me/ And he will sink, he will” (5.36-37). In the landlord’s estimation, his lack of a title is recompensed by his ability to engage in a financial competition with Sir Francis and emerge the victor.[28] In contrast, Sir Charles valorizes the claims of lineage over more material concerns. He resists Shafton’s bid for the manor house on the grounds that, “If this were sold our means should then be quite/ Razed from the bead-roll of gentility” (7.37-38). By viewing his home as a symbol of his noble status, the knight valorizes the inheritance of property over its acquisition by purchase.[29]

27. In large part, the conflict between these two definitions of property was rooted in changes in the land market that were generated by Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries. Jean-Christophe Agnew determines that a quarter to a third of England’s total landed area was put up for sale after 1538 (52). In the wake of the intense speculation that followed, property came increasingly to be viewed as a source of profit rather than as the center of a communal enterprise.[30] In its new incarnation, the manorial estate was not necessarily synonymous with the dispensation of charity, but could function as a commodity for exchange. Within this framework, a householder was no longer expected to provide financial assistance to his dependants; in turn, the customary recipients of such aid were no longer expected to offer service in return for his kindness. In seventeenth-century England, these shifts in the property market also had a profound effect on the nature and composition of the gentry. In his study of contemporary Yorkshire, Lawrence Stone notes that, of the 641 gentry families in the county in 1603, 180 had died out in the male line and 218 had earned the right to bear arms by 1642. According to his calculations, “This represents a disappearance and replacement of more than one family in four in a space of forty years” (*Crisis* 22-23). In the context of Stone’s analysis, Heywood’s choice of Yorkshire as the setting for his play and his juxtaposition of Shafton’s rise with Sir
Charles’ decline serves as an important illustration of rapid upward and downward mobility among the gentry.

28. At the same time, it is important to note that, despite his dwindling fortunes, Sir Charles continues to associate his gentility with his ownership of the manor house. A similar conflict regarding the symbolic significance of property informs Susan’s encounter with Shafton. Like her brother, who rejects the landlord’s proposition on the grounds that his home represents a “virgin title never yet deflowered,” Susan compares the inviolability of her person with that of their estate in her response to Shafton (7.25). She informs him: “Sir, we feed sparing and we labor hard/ We lie uneasy to reserve to us/ And our succession this small plot of ground” (italics mine 7.45-47). Unlike Sir Charles, who presents the manor house as an exclusive sign of “My country, and my father’s patrimony,” Susan foregrounds the labor she has performed in order to keep their property and name intact (3.90). Moreover, by presenting her effort as a means for preserving “our succession,” Susan places herself within the dynastic structure that her brother regards as the sole preserve of male kin.

29. Susan’s equation of her chastity and ancestry is similarly evident in her encounter with Sir Francis. Like Shafton, Sir Francis offers to pay Sir Charles’s debts, but instead of asking for a manor house in return, he presents his loan as a strategy for softening Susan’s resistance towards him. He reasons: “Well I will fasten such a kindness on her/ As shall o’ercome her hate and conquer it” (9. 66-67). To a far greater extent than Frankford’s “kind” punishment of Anne, the seeming altruism of Sir Francis’s proposal is undercut by his professed desire to exchange monetary favors for sexual ones. However, instead of securing her agreement, Sir Francis’s proposition merely solidifies Susan’s opposition and she rejects him on the grounds that he “would not shrink to spend a thousand pound/ To give the Mountfords’ name so deep a wound” (14.43-44). For Susan, the knight’s offer is motivated not by his love for her, but by his hatred of her line. In allying her honor with the family name, Susan suggests that the security of the Mountford estate stems as much from her able guardianship of its boundaries as from her brother’s defense of its purity. Most importantly, in rejecting Sir Francis, Susan demonstrates that, unlike Anne, she will be a trustworthy protector of her home. By proving herself an able housekeeper, Susan becomes a worthy candidate for matrimony, and she is duly rewarded for her defense when Sir Francis converts his proposition into a legitimate offer of marriage.

30. In addition to transforming her role from that of potential mistress to wife, Susan’s wedding to Sir Francis enables the reconciliation between her husband and brother. In a speech that parallels his alliance with Frankford, her new husband promises his former rival: “to end all strife/ I seal you my dear brother, her my wife” (14.146). By addressing his “dear brother” before his “wife,” Sir Francis privileges his homosocial union with Sir Charles over his marriage to Susan. He is duly rewarded for his choice in the responses of his interlocutors to his offer. Unlike Susan, who claims that she must “learn to love” her new husband, Sir Charles informs his brother-in-law, “Rich in your love I can never be poor,” a greeting to which Sir Francis responds, “All’s mine is yours; we are alike in state” (14.152-153). In this exchange, Sir Charles declares that the pain of his reduced fortune will be eased by the “love” that Sir Francis bestows upon him, while Sir Francis suggests that his wealth will soon reduce any financial imbalances between them. Just as he ignores Frankford’s bourgeois heritage, Sir Francis overlooks Sir Charles’s impoverishment at the moment of their reconciliation. His willingness to reinstate his fallen adversary indicates that their union does not depend on financial considerations, but on Sir Charles’ disavowal of the extravagant lifestyle that he once embraced.

31. Sir Francis’s facility for producing a coalition that includes members of the gentry and the impoverished nobility demonstrates that the drama’s landowners are not evaluated by their social or economic standing, but by their attitude towards hospitality. In this context, Sir Francis succeeds where his brothers-in-law have failed precisely because he espouses an ethos of selective generosity throughout the play. As opposed to Frankford, who conflates the duties owed to his wife with those due to his companion, Sir Francis is careful to offer financial incentives to members of his immediate
family rather than to strangers. And unlike Sir Charles, who mars his reputation and ancestral estate by his thoughtless violence, Sir Francis relies on legal rather than martial prowess to achieve his goals. The knight also distinguishes himself fromavaricious landlords like Shafton by entering into alliances with his fellow landowners instead of competing with them. Most importantly, in making these partnerships contingent upon the submission of Anne and Susan to their respective spouses, Sir Francis highlights the benefits of inoculating their collective enterprise against their female kin. By embracing an ethos of discriminatory kindness, the knight not only succeeds in straddling the golden mean between excessive liberality and needless thrift, but he also acts as a role model for Frankford and Sir Charles.[33]

32. In his domestic tragedy, Heywood emphasizes the disastrous consequences of inter-class liberality by focusing attention on the treachery of “unthankful kinsmen” towards their benefactors (10.6). Having learnt their lesson about providing too much assistance to their dependants, Frankford and Sir Charles forge kinship ties with Sir Francis in a union that hinges upon and rewards the landowners’ successful supervision of their finances and their female kin. The distinctions between unrestrained charity and selective generosity are most vividly illustrated in the marriage festivities that mark the beginning and end of Heywood’s play. The first of these scenes -- the nuptials between Frankford and Anne -- is a communal celebration in which the couple’s family, neighbors, and servants are invited to participate. The second -- the wedding between Sir Francis and Susan -- is an isolated event, whose primary purpose is to emphasize the reconciliation between Susan’s new husband and her brother. As the difference between the two weddings indicates, Heywood’s narrative gradually divorces kindness from its place within the manorial household in order to reposition it as an indicator of friendly relations between men of means, noble birth, or both. Moreover, by equating the cessation of social tension with the suppression of sexual conflict, the text presents its male protagonists as successful managers of their marital and financial affairs. Accordingly, even though A Woman Killed begins by celebrating the landlord’s benevolence towards male supplicants and female dependants alike, it ends by promoting a system in which wealth and favors are circulated primarily amongst male members of the gentry and nobility.

NOTES

I would like to thank James Holstun, Jessica Locke, Gregg Stewart, and the two anonymous readers at EMLS for their helpful feedback on my work.

[1] For a more extensive discussion of the word, see Oxford English Dictionary.

[2] All references to Heywood’s play are based on Martin Wiggins’ edition of the text.


[4] The recent focus on the broader definition of domesticity is at odds with early investigations of domestic drama in general and Heywood’s play in particular, which centered round issues of marital rather than social disharmony in the text. For an overview of the familial context of domestic drama, see Clark 10. For studies that prioritize the marital plots in Heywood, see Lieblein 196 and Ure 195.
In this context, also see Orlin “Domestic Tragedy” 380.

While I agree with Orlin’s claims regarding the dissolution of male friendship in the face of economic and sexual rivalry, I depart from her position in my focus on the restitution of masculine bonds among the bourgeois and aristocratic characters in the text.

Peter Holbrook offers a similar argument that Frankford’s “kindness” to Anne represents a validation of the middling sort and a rejection of aristocratic misconduct (103).

Like Lyn Bennett, Rebecca Ann Bach suggests that the most distinctive relationships in the play are between the male characters whose kinship produces a “homsocial imaginary” that encompasses landlords, servants and poor gentlemen like Wendall (517). For a broader discussion of inter-class, same-sex desire within the gentry household, see Bray 48.

I am indebted to one of the EMLS reviewers for the use of the term “compensatory kindness.”

On the rhetoric of kinship, also see Wrightson 82.

According to Karen Newman, the theory of companionate marriage promoted in texts like the Homily did not advocate for greater equality between the sexes, but instead replaced the external supervision of women by institutions like the parish or church, with the internal supervision of wives by their husbands (27).

On a reading of the wedding scene as establishing Frankford’s moral superiority over his brother-in-law, see Hillman 86.

For further discussion of the proverb, see Panek 374.

For a qualification of Williams’ claims that the genre excises social tensions, see Dubrow, 72-73.

As Orlin points out, Frankford’s disbursement of household charity is implicit in his name, “frank,” which signifies largesse (Private Matters 159).

Panek argues that Frankford’s choice of a male companion resembles a husband’s choice of a life-partner. By failing to distinguish between Wendall and Anne, Frankford confuses the demands of friendship with those of marriage (364-65).

Evidence that Wendall’s fears of being cast as an unworthy guest trump his concern with being condemned for adultery can be found in his persistent use of the terms “villain” and “ingrate” to describe his affair with Anne (6.84, 133 and 16.127).

For Wendall’s neglect of male bonds, see Bach 514.

Laura Bromley justifies Frankford’s punishment of Anne on the grounds that, since her affair attacks the “little kingdom” of the home, refusing to discipline her could be equated with condoning regicide (271). In a similarly allegorical reading of Frankford, Diana Henderson presents the landlord’s judgement of his wife as an imitatio Christi where the God-like Frankford is authorized to punish those who have sinned against him (“Many Mansions” 282). In contrast, Jennifer Panek suggests that the play illustrates the specious nature of Frankford’s “kindness,” a position with which I concur in my reading (363).

For a discussion of the proverb’s role within the play, see Panek 370. An alternative version of the proverb occurs in Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew, where Petruccio decides “to kill a wife with kindness”; that is, tame the recalcitrant Kate through a system of physical deprivation (4.1.189).
Frankford’s strategies for disciplining his wife resemble the forms of punishment advocated in Protestant marriage manuals from the period which, as Catherine Belsey delineates, indicated a preference for internal surveillance of the home over communal forms of control (146).

For a historical overview of Protestant marriage manuals, see Davies 58-61.

In her examination of the relationship between women and property in the period, Patricia Parker similarly suggests that illicit female sexuality was dangerous because it could transform the private space of the home into the “common” space of the brothel (105).

In his edition of the play, Martin Wiggins notes that it was set in Yorkshire rather than the Anglo-Scottish border where the 1388 battle of Chevy Chase occurred. As a result, he suggests that Sir Charles’ reference to “chevy chase” may either reference a local parish, Chevet, or nearby woodlands, Chevin, or be a periphrasis for hunting or hunting cry (74n95). For a discussion of the historical Chevy Chase, see Scobie’s edition of the play (8).

In the Defence of Poesie, Sir Philip Sidney evokes the battle at Chevy Chase as a model of chivalric warfare, stating “I never heard the olde song of Percy and Douglas that I found not my heart moved more then with a Trumpet” (106). The battle is also commemorated in a 1661 ballad, A Memoriable song on the unhappy hunting in Chevy Chase, which describes the heroic deaths of Percy, the Douglas, and their soldiers in the conflict.

For the various uses of the terms “cousin” and “kinsman,” see Cressy 66.

For a more extensive etymology of the term, see Oxford English Dictionary and Woodbridge (162).

Lawrence Stone draws attention to the frequent swapping of money for status in the sale of knighthoods, which increased dramatically in the first two decades of Jacobean rule, a period that also witnessed a boom in the property market. He notes that, from 1610-14, an average of 31 honors were granted every year, which increased to 199 in 1617 (Crisis 42).

On Sir Charles’ conflation of gentility and property ownership, see Orlin, Private Matters 154-57.

For further discussion of the reimagining of the country estate as private property rather than a communal site, see Sullivan, Drama of Landscape 171.

Orlin sees Mountford’s insistence on the sanctity of his home as a sign that honor is an exclusively male characteristic; his strategy thus devalues the role of female honor in the text (Private Matters 157, 175-76). While Orlin’s assertion is certainly applicable in Anne’s case, I suggest that Susan is just as assertive as her brother in equating her chastity with the inviolability of her home when she speaks with Shafton and Sir Francis.

The trading of sexual favors in order to secure a brother’s release also informs the Angelo-Isabella plot in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure (1603-04). In this context, it is important to note that Susan’s initial resistance to and unenthusiastic compliance with Sir Francis’s offer of marriage closely resembles Isabella’s ambiguous response to Duke Vincentio’s proposal (5.1.528-30).

In his examination of sixteenth and seventeenth-century poor relief, John Walter writes that the period was characterized by the “redefinition of reciprocities as discriminatory and discretionary charity” (127-28). Walter’s study of the shift from individual to state-sponsored forms of assistance provides an important lens through which to investigate the concomitant shift from an advocacy for household largesse to an emphasis on selective giving in Heywood’s play. For a contrasting view that kinship interaction grew more vigorous
rather than weaker in the period, see Cressy 38.

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