

A Response to Lisa Hopkins*

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In her brief but suggestive essay, "The False Domesticity of *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," Lisa Hopkins reminds us that the domestic context and description in Thomas Heywood's play are in fact self-conscious authorial inventions, providing us the opportunity to examine an apparently familiar landscape with new eyes. No longer are the homey details of Frankford brushing crumbs off his doublet, or the servants dancing the "Shaking of the Sheets," or the social strategies of playing cards to be examined as the *donnée* of the genre; rather, these parts of the play are perceived as Heywood's care in his craft, as integral aspects that shape audience response. The incremental layering of detail is something we can see in operation.

Perhaps more useful than this reminder about the fictional nature of the play is Hopkins's focus on "reading" as an integral part of the play's meaning. What Hopkins does in her essay is to link the accretion of "factual" details with the activity of "reading"—how Heywood "reads" the previous "true" examples of the genre of domestic tragedy so to create his own fictionalized version; how the seventeenth-century audience would contextualize cultural mores, both general and specific, in its experience of the play; how the various audiences of the play, whether viewers or readers, whether Renaissance or twentieth-century, "read" it against other, more "celebrated" plays. This emphasis on reading is truly a crux in Heywood criticism, for this play, seemingly so transparent and lucid, has provoked and still provokes distinctly polar interpretations from its commentators: depending upon one's point of

*Reference: Lisa Hopkins, "The False Domesticity of *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): 1-7.

view, the play's marriage is patriarchal in nature from beginning to end, or it is a patriarchal entity subverted by a wife's self-assertion; Frankford is a generous and forgiving husband, or he is an unbending and unfeeling monster; Anne is a stereotypical woman who is fated to fall, or she is a woman pushed by her husband to accept his best friend as her lover; Anne is saved by her act of self-contrition, or she is damned as a suicide; the play is straightforward domestic tragedy, or it displays the irony of topical commentary. How is a scholar to locate herself in this increasingly complicated chronicle of critical views?¹

Hopkins's explicit answer to this question is to locate "aesthetic value" within the reader, not in the product: "the kind of reading processes [A *Woman Killed with Kindness*] requires are substantially the same as those called for by tragedies such as *Hamlet* or *Othello*, which have, notoriously, been traditionally interpreted as dealing with concerns universally applicable" (6). By defining art as process rather than as product, Hopkins insists that only "right reading" will result in an evaluation of literary excellence.

While Hopkins might seem to eschew historicist analysis by this assertion that aesthetic value is a valid ground for criticism, her theoretical approach rather argues explicitly for the incorporation of these two seemingly disparate methods of interpretation. The emphasis upon right reading reveals Hopkins's discussion of the topicality of the northern setting as the negotiation between historicist and reader-response methodologies. Hopkins notes that an early seventeenth-century audience would identify Yorkshire as a location of Catholic opposition. While structurally part of her argument regarding the invention of domestic minutiae and Heywood's careful manipulation of audience response, Hopkins provides evidence for an assumption shared by most recent commentators on the play's theme: this is a play about resistance, either overt or sublimated. Since I have recently published a piece where I argue that the play participates in a kind of (culturally myopic) Puritan discourse of dissent, it would seem that Hopkins and I disagree about a substantive aspect of the play's topicality.² However, I am relatively sure that we do not. If, as readers, we follow Hopkins's lead and think about the *experience* of the play, rather than the *play as product*, then the topical details of the play coalesce into a general depiction of the

individual's struggle for autonomy and identity in an impersonal, even hostile world. (These topical details include such particulars as Anne's apparently humanist education; the depiction of Wendoll as a "second son," a member of the gentry or the aristocracy but without the inheritance of the firstborn; the taunt of "puritane" that Wendoll throws at Anne; the consistent associating of Wendoll with the devil, with the corollary that Anne has been possessed by a demon.) That Hopkins identifies the northern setting of Yorkshire as a widely-recognized site of Catholic opposition in the sixteenth century is yet again one more piece of evidence that the play, in general, explores issues of authority.

A Woman Killed with Kindness deliberately calls into question conventional attitudes, whether about the nature of (revenge) tragedy, the cultural attitude toward adulteress and cuckold, or the inherent tension between the Christian principle of forgiveness and the human desire for revenge and restitution. As part of the culture's discourse about obedience and rebellion, the play is an accretion of diverse local details, fitting together incrementally to suggest an attitude, a question, a concern: what are the nature and the consequences of human responsibility? By locating meaning in "reading," Hopkins grounds art in the rhetorical relationship between writer, subject, and audience, thus mediating the intersection between issues topical and universal, between concerns ideological and aesthetic. Such negotiation clarifies the grounds upon which this play has been so widely and disparately "explained," and I would suggest, provides a useful starting point for future examination of *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and of other domestic drama of the period.

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¹See, for example, Bonnie L. Alexander, "Cracks in the Pedestal: A Reading of *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," *Massachusetts Studies in English* 7.1 (1978): 1-11; Nancy A. Gutierrez, "The Irresolution of Melodrama: Adultery in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," *Exemplaria* 1.2 (1989): 265-91; Peter Ure, "Marriage and the Domestic Drama

in Heywood and Ford," *English Studies* 32 (1951): 200-16; John Canuteson, "The Theme of Forgiveness in the Plot and Subplot of *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," *Renaissance Drama* n.s. 2 (1969): 123-41; Hallet Smith, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," *PMLA* 53 (1938): 138-47; Frederick Kiefer, "Heywood as Moralizer in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 3 (1986): 83-98; Roland Wymer, *Suicide and Despair in Renaissance Drama* (Brighton: Harvester P, 1986) 81-83; Jennifer Panek, "Punishing Adultery in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*," *SEL* 34 (1994): 357-78; Henry Hitch Adams, *English Domestic or Homiletic Tragedy 1575-1642* (New York: Columbia UP, 1943) 144-59.

²Nancy A. Gutierrez, "Exorcism by Fasting in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*: A Paradigm of Puritan Resistance?" *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 33 (1994): 43-62.