

# Absolving frankford: analyzing "kindness" in a woman killed with kindness



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It is easy for a modern audience to look upon the actions of Master Frankford in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and recoil in disgust. While his actions may be starkly seen as emotional abuse today, within the world of the play his punishment for Anne is praised as a gentlemanly solution to his wife's adultery. Close readings of the text provide insight into Frankford's actions and allow the reader to see beyond their initial perception that he is more a domestic abuser. By analyzing the way *A Woman Killed with Kindness* presents its acts of kindness committed by Frankford and the subplot characters, the difference between the emotions found in the main plot and subplot, and the way it juxtaposes his actions with alternative solutions he could have taken, I will attempt to prove through comparisons with the side story involving Sir Francis, Sir Charles and Susan that *A Woman Killed with Kindness* views Frankford's actions as genuine acts of kindness.

The most immediately apparent signifier that Frankford's actions are genuinely kind is how the play distinguishes false kindness from true kindness. Juxtaposing the actions of the characters brings the differences between the sincere acts and the disingenuous acts into sharp relief. For example, after offering a loan to Sir Charles and hearing him declare that he has only a small sum of money and a summer home in his possession, Shafton says in aside, "That must I have it, it lies convenient for me... 'Tis not for love I proffered him this coin, / But for my gain and pleasure" (5. 49-53). The text wastes no time in explaining what Shafton is truly after; it is stated plainly with very little room for interpretation beyond speculation. Another example can be found with the "kindness" Sir Francis Acton shows

Susan after Sir Charles is placed in debtor's prison: "Woo her with gifts I cannot... How then? / Well, I will fasten such a kindness on her / As shall overcome her hate and conquer it" (9. 62-67). This is an even more obvious display of false kindness. Unlike Shafton, Sir Francis does not even bother to put on any pretence about why he wishes to be generous to Susan. Both shows of "kindness" clearly define what Shafton and Sir Francis are hoping to gain through their actions — the Mountford summer home and Susan's favour, respectively — and how they hope to achieve it. These two instances serve as contrasts for Frankford's two main acts of kindness. The first, offering his home to Wendell, displays none of the "tells" discussed in the previous two. When Frankford propositions Wendoll to take lodging in his home there is no aside or any mention of an ulterior motive. The only explanation given as to why Frankford is doing this is that Frankford has "preferred [Wendoll] to a second place / In [his] opinion and [his] best regard" (4. 32-33). Frankford's other main act of kindness, sending Anne away once he has discovered her affair with Wendoll, is more controversial but is still portrayed as having no ulterior motive. There are no asides detailing a master plan to shame Anne to her eventual death, nor does the text provide any reasons for Frankford to discard Anne aside from the ones he openly says. He does it because he feels betrayed and because he fears the corruption Anne has suffered will reflect poorly on their children, calling their legitimacy into question. To summarize: if the play wanted the audience to view Frankford's actions as falsely kind, it would be more obvious about it, as it was with the actions of Shafton and Sir Francis. Following this pattern, it becomes evident that Frankford's actions throughout *A Woman Killed with Kindness* are viewed by the play as true acts of kindness.

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Much like how the play subtly conveys the difference between true kindness and false kindness to highlight Frankford's true nature, a key piece of evidence proving that *A Woman Killed with Kindness* views Frankford's actions as genuinely kind is the indications of emotions that accompany the acts of generosity throughout the play. For instance, compare Frankford's emotions during his acts of kindness to those of the subplot characters. During his confrontation with Anne after discovering her affair, Frankford expresses his sorrow at his wife's betrayal, saying, " Spare thou thy tears, for I will weep for thee / And keep thy countenance, for I'll blush for thee" (13. 84-85). Here, Frankford is vulnerable, almost empathetic. His confession both recognizes Anne's humanity by acknowledging that she feels sorrow and shame and prohibits her from feeling anything because his own feelings take precedence. He was the one that was betrayed by his spouse and best friend, not Anne. This is significant because it further proves that Frankford's intentions have been pure. Were he to have planned to cause the downfall of either Anne or Wendoll, he would not exhibit nearly the level of emotion he does with no hint to the audience that there was a sinister intent behind his actions. The play allows the audience to sympathize with Frankford. Contrast this with Sir Francis, who becomes smitten with Susan and resolves to free her brother from prison so that she will have no choice but to have sex with him: " In her I'll bury my hate of [Sir Charles]" (9. 72). Sir Francis' emotions tend to focus on less sympathetic outlets. Yes, he states that he will renounce his hate, but his phrasing is oddly sexual and exploitative. It is an uncomfortable pun to those who notice it and further depicts Sir Francis as an uncaring man to Frankford's wronged philanthropist. This parallel further

proves that Frankford's actions throughout *A Woman Killed with Kindness* are viewed by the play as true acts of kindness.

Not only does *A Woman Killed with Kindness* express its viewpoint that Frankford's acts are genuinely kind through its indications of emotions, it also conveys its viewpoint by hinting at an alternative, more severe action Frankford could have taken. To begin, when he finally discovers Anne and Wendoll in bed together, he contemplates killing them but stops himself, saying, " But that I would not damn two precious souls / Bought with my Saviour's blood and send them laden / With all their scarlet sins on their backs" (13. 44-46). This parallels an earlier scene where Sir Charles murders two of Sir Francis' men in a fit of rage: " It was not I, but rage, did this vile murder" (3. 51). It serves as a reminder of what men in the world of the play can do when enraged. And yet he does not take violent action. True, he is noted in the stage direction to be chasing Wendoll off-stage with his sword drawn, but he does not put a scratch on him. This speaks to his character as being fundamentally superior to many men of his time who would have continued chase even after the maid attempts to stop him. This is also reflected in Anne's gruesome expectations for Frankford's punishment when her affair with Wendoll is discovered; this can also serve as another example of an alternative path Frankford could have taken. As she kneels, guilty before her husband, Anne says, " Though I deserve a thousand thousand fold / More than you can inflict... mark not my face / Nor hack me with your sword" (13. 94-99). This once again was the expectation of the time, that cuckolded men were to severely punish their adulterous wives. It seems as if

every character in the play is expecting Anne to be put to death for her crime. As Sir Francis says when he hears of Anne's situation,

My brother Frankford showed too mild a spirit

In the revenge of such a loathèd crime;

Less than he did, no man of spirit could do.

I am so far from blaming his revenge

That I commend it; had it been my case,

Their souls at once had from their breasts been freed. (17. 16-21)

It could be argued that simply because Frankford does not take certain more abusive actions towards Anne and Wendoll, it does not automatically make him kind. However, this ignores the result of his less violent actions. Looking back on his initial reaction to seeing them in bed together, the footnote states, " 44-8.] If Frankford had killed Anne and Wendoll before they had a chance to repent, according to traditional theology, their souls would have gone to hell" (13). The text implies that this weighs heavily on him, as he rests and contemplates for a moment before Anne and Wendoll are woken up. Deeming their souls " precious" denotes that he finds value in them despite how they have wronged him. Frankford not only grants them their lives but the opportunity to save their immortal souls by repenting for the sins they have committed against him. Given the facts, it is near irrefutable that Frankford's actions throughout A Woman Killed with Kindness are viewed by the play as true acts of kindness.

In a cast full of men who manipulate and abuse others for personal gain, Frankford is a notable character for being portrayed by the viewpoint of the play to be genuinely kind. It shows through its portrayal of kindness, its difference in the emotional complexities of the characters and finally, in the actions that could have been taken, that Frankford's actions throughout the play are meant to be interpreted as genuine acts of kindness based on the play's viewpoint. While the results are unfortunate, it is refreshing to know that Frankford was not ill-intended. However, given that almost every male character is shown to in some way be underhanded or manipulative, it is easy to perceive Frankford in the same way. It is a shame that his subtle kindness will go unnoticed to most modern audiences who will end their understanding of the character at his seemingly cruel ministrations.