

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Theatre and the Card-Playing Scene in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed With Kindness*

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At the beginning of the seventeenth century, card-playing scenes had already been established as a long-standing *topos* of the visual arts. Ever since the late Middle Ages painters and engravers had chosen this particular motif to represent an ideal of sociability, scenes of seduction, or one of the many objects symbolizing the vanity of human life, as we can see from representations of the Bonfire of the Vanities.



Fig.1 Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet, *The Cardplayers*, 1485, print, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Fig.2 Anon., *Saint John Capistrano Exhorts his Adherents to Burn Cards and Gaming Boards in the Cathedral Square of Bamberg*, 1470-74, oil on panel, Historisches Museum, Bamberg.

A Woman Killed is a good example of a play that uses a card game to instruct audiences in how to engage with theatre as a game of ‘imperfect information’. Approaching theatre as a card game, audiences find themselves not as passive observers of plot developments but as players with an epistemological stake in the action.³

In the course of this paper, I would like to argue that the educational purpose of this specific card game scene, which Gina Bloom has recently analysed,⁴ also foregrounds the superiority of theatre to other forms of leisure, something that Heywood would later theorize in his *Apology for Actors* published in 1612. I will start by questioning the visual richness of a scene which, strictly speaking, is not necessary to the unfolding of the plot. This will then lead me to see to what extent the wealth of details in this scene actually provides insight into some of the crucial issues of the main plot: the card game itself hints at the corrupt sociability of Frankford’s household and at his unavoidable loss of property. Finally, we will see that this scene points to Frankford’s flaw as a distracted husband in a way that contrasts with the audience’s greater participation in this specific passage. The card game scene therefore highlights, I will argue, theatre’s heuristic purpose and pits it against the art of concealing which was closely associated with card-playing.

I. Staging a Game Scene: A ‘Barren Subject’ Upon ‘a Bare Scene’?

The stage directions of Heywood’s *A Woman Killed With Kindness* are notoriously detailed. This is especially the case during the card game scene. Although it is impossible to know whether or not Heywood was influenced by paintings or engravings depicting similar subjects, we may note the markedly pictorial dimension of this particular scene. Special attention is devoted to the game itself which calls for a whole range of props, so much so that the prologue’s initial apologetic claim that we are about to witness a ‘barren subject’ upon a ‘bare scene’ (Prologue, 4) seems particularly ironical in scene 8. The props mentioned in the stage direction preceding the game therefore suggest the interior of a rich household: ‘*Enter Mistress Anne, Master Wendoll, Master Cranwell, Nicholas, and Jenkin, with cards, carpet, stools, and other necessaries*’. In addition to these ‘necessaries’ which are present in other passages of

³ Gina Bloom, ‘Games’, in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. by Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 189-210 (p. 192).

⁴ Gina Bloom, *Gaming the Stage* (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 2018), pp. 63-98.

the play, the servants' cues also indicate that objects specifically linked to the card game, such as candles, counters, and a box, were then brought on stage:

JENKIN: A pair of cards, Nich'las, and a carpet to cover the table. Where's Sisly with her counters and her box? Candles and candlesticks there! (8.115-17)

This wealth of props might seem paradoxical in a scene which is, in itself, not essential to the plot. However, it serves a double purpose here.

Firstly, it is indicative, not only of the domestic intimacy portrayed on stage, but also of Frankford's social status. Although playing cards were relatively cheap and very popular objects (according to Roger Ascham's *Toxophilus* a pack of cards cost approximately twopence),⁵ they could also suggest a refined lifestyle as we can see in some group portraits of the time. Playing cards could function as a sign of polished sociability, just like chess for instance. As a group activity, a card game such as the one we find in Thomas Heywood's play enhances the impression of a unified household and of refined sociability. The organisation of space on stage would have conveyed the same impression as the protagonists of the play were all grouped around the game table, highlighting what Catherine Richardson describes as 'a strong sense of a physically coherent household'.⁶ Playing games after supper was a luxury that only the upper classes of Elizabethan society could legally afford as is made evident from this act dated back to Henry VII:

Item it is ordeyned & enacted the .xix. yere of the sayd most noble kyng Henry the .vii. that none apprentyse ne seruaunt at husbandry, laborer ne seruaunt artificer, playe at the tables from the feaste of Ester nexte commyng, ne at tennys, closhe, dyce, cardes, bowles, nor any other unlawful games in no wyse, out of the .xii. days at Christmas, and than to play only in dwellyng houses of his maister, or where the mayster or any of the sayd seruantes is present, upon peyne of imprisonment by the space of a day in the stockes openly.⁷

⁵ Roger Ascham, *Toxophilus* (London, 1545), p. 16, in *Early English Books Online* <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 10 October 2016].

⁶ Catherine Richardson, *Domestic Life and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern England, The Material Life of the Household* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 153.

⁷ England and Wales. Sovereign., *Actis made by dyuers our most noble progenytours knynges of this realme agaynst unlauffull games* (London, 1536), in *Early English Books Online*, <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 10 September 2015].

As Marjorie McIntosh underlines, subsequent legislation under Henry VIII extended the number of professional categories affected by this prohibition, which was upheld all throughout Elizabeth I's reign.⁸ Playing cards is also listed as one of the activities a courtier should regularly indulge in in Thomas Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*.⁹ Accordingly, the card game here acts as a clear hallmark amongst others of Frankford's social status. As such, it is the indoor counterpart to the hawking scene between Mountford and Francis Acton, which was also perceived as a distinctly sophisticated pastime in scene 3.

Secondly, the richness of the props in this scene testifies to what Rick Bowers has called the 'smaller scale'¹⁰ of the play and enhances the involvement of the audience who has to pay close attention to what goes on in this passage in order to understand the scene. Not only are the props used in this scene numerous and varied, they are also particularly small considering they are used on a stage. Moreover, they trigger a great deal of stage business as the cards are shuffled, dealt to all the players, and passed on from one player to the next. If we follow the stage directions, we notice that the cards are first cut by Wendoll, then by Anne, before they are shuffled by Frankford who deals them. However, Frankford loses count and Wendoll resumes dealing the cards. All these movements, which are almost imperceptible, and yet at the centre of the stage, create an atmosphere of secrecy that would probably whet the spectators' curiosity. As Gina Bloom underlines, it is highly unlikely that the audience would have been able to read the cards that were being dealt on stage, which is why this scene, although it is not central to the plot, might be seen as 'the climax of theatrical engagement and participation'.¹¹ The entire scene is a commentary on a game that the audience cannot see. Wendoll's invitation to Frankford to look at his card ('you see', 168) in particular underlines the small size of an object the audience cannot see in detail. The props, and the visual richness of this passage in general, can therefore be construed as a way to

⁸ Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1998]), p. 100. The fact that servants were still not officially allowed to indulge in these pastimes is also mentioned in John Fit, *A diamonde most precious, worthy to be marked instructing all maysters and seruauntes* (London, 1577), sig. G1^r, in *Early English Books Online* <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 3 May 2017].

⁹ A courtier should indeed know how to 'To play for his pastime at Dice and Cardes, not wholye for monies sake, nor fume and chafe in his losse.' in Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Thomas Hoby (London, 1561), sig. Yy4^v, in *Early English Books Online* <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 13 April 2017].

¹⁰ Rick Bowers, 'A Woman Killed with Kindness: Plausibility on a Smaller Scale', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 24.2 (1984), 293-306.

¹¹ Bloom, p. 204.

heighten the audience's interpretative efforts. These efforts are essential in a scene that actually provides a reading of the main plot of the play.

II. The Hidden Meanings of the Card Game

The card game of scene 8 is both a metaphor for and a comment on Anne Frankford's adultery. Heywood draws on the many associations of card games of his time in order to bring to the fore some elements about the crucial issues raised in the main plot of his play. Some authors, as we shall see, considered card games to be a sign of moral and social decadence. The card game therefore emphasizes the degradation of social bonds in Frankford's household, as well as the loss of his property.

Several authors had been critical of card games in early modern England. As early as 1516, in Thomas More's *Utopia*, for instance, Raphael contrasts the Utopians' custom after supper with that of the English who, like Frankford, Wendoll, and Anne, enjoy playing at 'ruinous games' after dinner:

After supper, they devote an hour to recreation, in their gardens during the summer, or during winter in the common halls where they have their meals. There they either play music or amuse themselves with conversation. They know nothing about gambling with dice or other such foolish and ruinous games.¹²

In 1616, Thomas Adams also frowned upon this ludic habit: 'Let us not doe like some Courtiers, that having Light allowed them, Play it out at Cardes, and goe to Bed darkling.'¹³ In his *Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes* (1577), John Northbrooke considers it a 'brutish' and 'simple pastime':

YOUTH: They vse to playe at Cardes commonly alwayes after Supper. &c.
AGE: I will condemne no man that doth so. But Plato sayth in his Banquet, that Players and Minstrels that are used after suppers, is a simple pastime, and fit for brutish and ignorant men, which knowe not howe to bestowe their time in better exercises, I may with better reason say the lyke by all Carders and Diceplayers.¹⁴

¹² Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. by George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 50.

¹³ Thomas Adams, *The Sacrifice of Thankfulness* (London, 1616), pp. 13-14, in *Early English Books Online* <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 12 May 2017].

¹⁴ John Northbrooke, *A treatise wherein dicing, dauncing, vaine playes or enterluds with other idle*

Card games were also particularly dangerous according to such authors because they were sometimes designed to trap gentlemen allured by their suggestion of luxury and the perspective of monetary gain they offered. In a text by Gilbert Walker, for instance, a young man tells the story of how he was cheated out of his fortune at a game at cards:

consumed was our dinner, and after the table was removed, in came one of the wayters with a fayre sylver boule full of Dyce and Cardes, now maysters (quod the goodman) who is so disposed, fal to: here is my. xx. li. win it & weare it. Then eache man chose his game, some kepte the good man company at the hasard, some matched themselves at a new game called Primero.¹⁵

Card games were held as the symbol of a frivolous life and card players were denounced for their vain and idle pursuits. The fact that a card game is chosen as a metaphorical representation of Anne Frankford and Wendoll's affair is therefore in keeping with the symbolism attached to card games at the time. In this regard, this scene is very close to the one we find in act 2 scene 2 of Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* in which a chess game is used both as a diversion and as a metaphorical depiction of the seduction of Bianca by the Duke. Parlour games could also act as a sign of corrupt sociability. The disagreements of Frankford and his guests about the game they should play before finally settling on 'vied-ruff', which was probably a trick-taking game like whist, here hint at the degradation of the social bonds in Frankford's household. Their double meanings serve the same purpose. Most of the games mentioned are allusions to Anne and Wendoll's affair and often bear thinly veiled threats of exclusion from the household as we can see from the two following examples:

NICHOLAS I can tell you, sir, the game that Master Wendoll is best at.

WENDOLL What game is that, Nick?

NICHOLAS Marry, sir, knave out of doors. (8.141-3)

Here Nicholas reverts the threat his master had voiced earlier in the same scene against his servant:

FRANKFORD (*To Nicholas*) : Thou art a knave !

pastimes (London, 1577), p. 111, in *Early English Books Online* <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 10 October 2016].

¹⁵ Gilbert Walker, *A manifest detection of the moste vyle and detestable vse of diceplay, and other practises lyke the same a myrrour very necessary for all yonge gentilmen* (London, 1555), sig. A7^{r-v}, in *Early English Books Online* <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 17 September 2015].

I'll turn you with your base comparisons
Out of my doors. (8.45-7)

Later Wendoll seems to make an identical, albeit veiled, threat of exclusion only this time the threat is directed to the master of the house himself, Frankford:

CRANWELL If you cannot agree upon the game, to post and pair.
WENDOLL We shall be soonest pairs, and my good host,
When he comes late home, he must kiss the post (8.154-6).

The allusion to the game of post and pair which was based on three cards each player was dealt serves as a hint to the triangular relationship between Anne, Wendoll, and Frankford in Wendoll's cue, who then links it to the proverbial expression *to kiss the post* defined in the *OED* as 'to be shut out in consequence of arriving too late'. In addition to the allusions during the card game, the metaphorical relation between Anne's affair and the card game itself is encapsulated by the use of the verb 'play' at the end of the scene when Frankford contrives a device to confront the lovers just when they least suspect it:

This being compassed,
At a set hour a letter shall be brought me,
And when they think they may securely play,
They are nearest to danger (8.211-14).

As both a sign of sociability and a metaphor for Anne Frankford and Wendoll's affair, the card game motif is therefore used to indicate that this scene is located at the threshold between legitimate and 'illegitimate intimacy'.¹⁶

The game also reveals the misplacement and the dilapidation of Frankford's property. In this regard, it is reminiscent of fears voiced by enemies of games, especially dice and card games, that such activities entailed the impoverishment of many gentlemen and therefore represented a threat to the social order. Pamphlets and cony-catching literature abounded in stories of social demise of young men who had lost their fortune at the

¹⁶ 'This dynamic between seen and unseen, public and private domestic space, eventually expresses the progression of an illegitimate intimacy, one which takes the penetration of household space too far.' See Richardson, p. 154.

gaming table.¹⁷ Gilbert Walker specifically warned young gentlemen against the dangers of dice and cards for their ‘patrimonies’ in his address to the reader:

To the reader

I wish all Gentlemen that have their Patrimonies newly come into their hands, & all others whose minds be given to play, & are ignorant what deceite is used in everie place both at Dice and Cardes, a little to spend their time in reading this Pamphlet, published for their good, lest in few daies they come farther behind, than all the travailes of their latter yeres can overtake againe¹⁸

Similarly, in a text against unlawful games he addressed to the mayor and aldermen of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the clergyman James Balmford states that ‘carding’ is the cause of ‘the pittifull undoing of too too manie’.¹⁹ Thomas Wilcox also mentioned ‘the distruction and overthrowe of families and houtholdes’ entailed by the loss of money in such games in his *Glasse for Gamesters* in 1581.²⁰ The economic anxieties linked to playing were reflected by the increasing focus of legal texts on the financial impact of forbidden games in the sixteenth century.²¹ As most card games involved money it is likely that the game the characters are playing in this scene was identified by the audience as possibly inducing a genuine economic loss for Frankford. In fact, gambling features prominently in the subplot in which the characters bet on their hawks in scene 3. Wendoll himself mentions a wager in our scene: ‘If you play at new-cut, I am soonest hitter of any here, for a wager.’ (8.148-9). Furthermore, the dealing of the cards by Wendoll on stage enact this illegitimate redistribution of property: the cards are first shuffled and dealt by Frankford, who then loses count and therefore has to surrender the pack of cards to his rival. The different movements that take place at a card game aroused suspicion as we can see from this text by Thomas Lodge describing the typical gamester who was often equated with a cheat:

¹⁷ To quote only a few examples of such texts: John Marckant, *Of dice, wyne and women* (London, 1571) and Gilbert Walker, *A manifest detection*.

¹⁸ Gilbert Walker, *Mihil Mumchance, his discoverie of the art of cheating in false dyce play, and other unlawfull games* (London, 1597), sig. A1^v, in *Early English Books Online* <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 14 September 2015].

¹⁹ James Balmford, *To the maior, aldermen, and inhabitants of N.* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1600), in *Early English Books Online* <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 13 February 2018].

²⁰ Thomas Wilcox, *A glasse for gamesters* (London, 1581).

²¹ ‘During the sixteenth century many presentments for gaming were associated with rising concern about the problems of poverty more generally. Statements about indoor games were now more likely to include an economic emphasis, and in some communities people seem to have been reported only they played for money’; see McIntosh, p. 102.

This fellow is excellent at a Bum Card, and without the helpe of Bomelius dog, he can burne the knave of clubs, and find him in the stocke, or in his bosome, hée hath cards for the nonce for Prima vista, others for Sant, other for Primero; and hee is so cunning in shuffling & conveying his thumbes, that whensoever he deales, you shall be sure of no good dealing²²

We may note that Frankford feels robbed as he reveals to the spectators in an aside at the end of the scene hereby equating his wife Anne with property and a stake lost at a card game:

FRANKFORD (*aside*): Thou robbest me of my soul, of her chaste love.
In thy false dealing thou hast robbed my heart (8.177-8).

Philip Stubbes also encourages his readers to be wary of card playing which only leads to ‘a certain kind of smooth, deceitfull & sleighty theft, whereby many a one is spoiled of all that ever he hath, sometimes of his life withal, yea, of body and soule for ever’.²³ The dire economic consequences of excessive gaming on households is expressed by John Davies in an epigram printed in 1611 in *The Scourge of Folly*, in which the author compares a gamester to ivy:

A Gamester’s like the Ivy on a Wall;
Which creepes into the joints, unjoining it;
But when, unjointed so, it’s like to fall,
The joints together it doth (tottering) knit:
A Gamster so, undoes a sound estate
With Gaming much, but, even as he sincks,
With Tricks he learns in Game (which Truth doth hate)
He (staggering) is upheld to purse some Chincks:
Then, they that fall to plaie to end their stay,
Pray God they fall to works the end of play.²⁴

²² Thomas Lodge, *Wits miserie, and the worlds madnesse discovering the devils incarnat of this age* (London, 1596), pp. 40-1.

²³ Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses*, ed. by Margaret Jane Kidnie (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in conjunction with Renaissance English Text Society, 2002), p. 238.

²⁴ John Davies, *The Scourge of Folly* (London, 1611), p.83, sig. G2^r, in *Early English Books Online*, <<https://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 2 May 2017].

This epigram sheds light on Wendoll's role in the play. In addition to the wager he mentions during the game itself, several elements in the play help characterize Wendoll as a gamester. He initially enters Frankford's house bringing the news of Francis Acton and Charles Mountford's excessive gaming – in which he himself also took part ('Ten angels on Sir Francis Acton's hawk; / As much upon his dogs' [1.104-5]) – and its tragic consequences. Later in the play, when he declares his love to Anne, he resorts to terms that denote gambling: 'For you I'll hazard all – what care I?' (6.136). Much like the ivy in the epigram, Wendoll's association to gaming foreshadows the impending disintegration of Frankford's household and the loss of what he perceives as being his property, his wife.

The card game upholds Anne's objectification and lack of agency. Although she expresses regret in several asides, she plays along with Wendoll according to the arrangements made between the men at the beginning of the game:

ANNE: Come Master Frankford, who shall take my part?
FRANKFORD: Marry, that will I, sweet wife.
WENDOLL: No, by my faith, sir, when you are together I sit out; it
 must be Mistress Frankford and I, or else it is no match...
FRANKFORD 'Tis no great matter, neither. Come, Master Cranwell,
 shall you and I take them up?
CRANWELL: At your pleasure, sir. (8.121-9)

This passage, therefore, clearly illustrates the extent to which what Lyn Bennett has called 'homosocial economies'²⁵ in the play lead to Anne's commodification. Anne is repeatedly compared to a playing-card during the scene: first in the pun on 'queen' and 'quean' (163-4), and later when Wendoll is mistakenly given a queen, 'This queen I have more than mine own' (68). Perhaps even more than in any other scene of the play, the card game equates Anne with a commodity which is passed on from one player to the other.

However, Frankford's role in the game, much like his role in the main plot, is also quite ambiguous. He is the one who suggests a game at cards in the first place: 'Now we have supp'd, a table and to cards' (114). His decision not to act upon Nicholas's earlier revelation about his wife's adultery leads him to play along with the two lovers. More to the point, it is Frankford's lack of perceptive skill and focus that stands out during the

²⁵ Lyn Bennett, 'The Homosocial Economies of "A Woman Killed with Kindness"', *Renaissance and Reformation* 24.2 (2000), 35-61.

indictment of the deceit anti-ludic texts generally ascribed to card games, and as a cautionary story for naïve players who, like Frankford, fall prey to dangerous cheats. By contrast, Heywood described theatre's aim as a way to uncover the truth: 'It followes that we prove these exercises to have beene the discoverers of many notorious murders, long concealed from the eyes of the world'.³¹ The card game scene therefore draws a contrast between the concealments inherent in such games and the heuristic and educational purpose of theatre itself, which encourages the audience to take a closer look at what is going on on stage. Indeed, the card game brings to the fore the strategies of concealment and lies of Anne Frankford and Wendoll. Frankford repeatedly and ironically accuses Wendoll and his wife of 'false play': 'I must look on to you, Master Wendoll, for you will be playing false; nay so will my wife, too.' (8.130-1). Suspicions of cheating linger on throughout the game despite Anne Frankford's requirement before the game starts that 'them that are taken playing false forfeit the set' (8.133). Frankford then openly accuses Wendoll: 'You have served me a bad trick, Master Wendoll!' (8.171). In the end, Frankford, who can no longer keep up the comedy of hospitality and the illusion of a harmonious domesticity, resigns from the game hereby leaving the cheaters triumphant: 'I will give o'er the set. I am not well.' (8.181). The scene therefore widens the gap between 'false play', designed to cheat and conceal and theatrical play, in which the audience is actively involved in deciphering and uncovering the truth.

That Thomas Heywood and his contemporaries were of course aware of the joint indictment of card games and plays is made evident by the dedicatory texts of the *Apology for Actors*. Two of them argue that theatre was a nobler form of leisure than card playing. Ar. Hopton argues in 1612 that plays are a 'nobler sport' which turns men away from other more foolish pastimes:

And did it nothing but in pleasing sort,
Keepe gallants from mispending of their time,
It might suffice: yet here is nobler sport,
Acts well contriv'd, good Prose, and stately rime.
To call to Church, *Campanus* bells did make,
Playes, dice, and drinke invite men to forsake³²

³¹ Heywood, *Apology*, sig. G1^v.

³² *Ibid.*, sig. A1^v. and A2^f.

Richard Perkins, actor of Queen Anne's Men and friend of Thomas Heywood according to the *ODNB*, also describes theatre as a more respectable form of entertainment and as a way to avoid such 'unlawfull' pastimes as cards and dice:

Thou that do'st raile at me for seeing a play,
How wouldst thou have me spend my idle houres?
Wouldst have me in a Taverne drinke all day?
Melt in the Sunnes heate? or walke out in showers?
Gape at the Lottery from morne till even,
To heare whose mottoes blankes have, and who prises?
To hazzard all at dice (chance six or seven?)
To card? or bowle? My humour this dispises.³³

The card game scene therefore also provides a case in point of this new attempt at differentiating between the different forms of play in order to place theatre amongst the noble and 'lawfull recreations' of the day.

To conclude, the card game scene in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* is turned into a form of dramatic anamorphosis suggesting both a rich and idealised household and its forthcoming destruction. The card game scene provides a visual illusion of wealth and harmony and denounces this illusion all the while. As such, this scene warns its audience against the dangers of 'playing false' and dangerously deceptive illusions in a way which foregrounds, by contrast, the heuristic and ethical purposes of theatre in general and domestic tragedy in particular. A close-reading of the game therefore unveils the corrupt nature of the social bonds of Frankford's household as well as the shared responsibility of Wendoll and Frankford in Anne's adultery. By taking up the symbolism and the different accusations that were levelled against card games at the time, Thomas Heywood was trying even further to retrieve theatre from the common accusations against other forms of play.

³³ *Ibid.*, sig. A2v. and A3^r.