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Research Article:

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conueyances:” Spying as Good Service in Thomas  
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Appearing in print in 1603, *A Woman Killed with Kindness* tells in the main plot the story of the Frankfords, a gentleman and a lady of considerable wealth and status: Master Frankford describes his education and upbringing as making him ‘companion with a king’ (sig. B4r; IV.4), and Mistress Frankford is said to possess accomplishments that announce her the ‘daughter of a prince’ (sig. A4r; I.20). The play opens with the wedding being celebrated by the couple’s friends, relatives, acquaintances, retainers, tenants and domestic servants. The opening scene introduces into the newly formed matrimonial household not only a wife, but also a resident friend. The household master offers Wendoll, his newly made friend, a chamber, a horse, a servant to wait on him and permanent provision of food and drink in return for friendship: ‘be my companion,’ he asks of Wendoll, ‘welcome to me forever—’ an offer that, as Richard Rowland, one of the play’s most recent critics, observes verges on the language of matrimony (130). Wendoll is planted in the Frankfords’ household and, as the play progresses, he increasingly occupies the position of a surrogate wife to Master Frankford: ‘I am to his body/ As necessary as his digestion,/ And equally do make him whole or sicke’ (sig. C3r; VI.39-42); my ‘hart was joynd and knit together [to his]’ (sig. C3r; VI.49)—descriptions of the relationship that resonate with contemporary designation of married couples as organically unified—as ‘one flesh.’<sup>1</sup> Not satisfied with these privileges, Wendoll

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Cleaver, sig. F8v.

aspires for one further domestic privilege: Mistress Anne. He successfully seduces her into a clandestine affair that lasts for a number of years. As a result, the householder's position of domestic authority is usurped, the household is divided between the two authority figures, and servants find themselves in the midst of domestic chaos—the splitting of the house into two and the ensuing domestic chaos being registered in the circulation of two sets of house keys, one kept by Master Frankford, the other by Mistress Anne and her lover. Nick, an elevated servant in the household hierarchy, detects the betrayal of his master's trust, actively engaging in righting the wrong he witnesses. His chosen method of verifying his initial suspicions and of putting things in the household right? Spying on his mistress and her lover, on their private encounters, intimate conversations and gestures. He eventually communicates the outcome of his spying to his master, consequently joining forces with him to banish the offenders, both mistress and friend-lover, and to cleanse the patriarchal house from transgressors.

In this paper, I argue that Nick's act of monitoring, spying on and policing the behaviour of his mistress and her lover is one of usurpation of the exclusive rights that early modern theorizing on good domestic government assigned to household *masters*. The servant's usurpation of his master's position, more importantly, is neither depicted as one of dangerous subversion nor condemned as one of rebellion. Instead, Nick's act of spying on his mistress is rewarded when he is invited by his master to become both confidante and companion in the effort (eventually successful) of catching the offenders in the act. His act of spying is rewarded when, emphatically, he continues to be included in the patriarchal house after the publicly disgraced mistress is exiled and excluded from it. *A Woman Killed with Kindness* engages with contemporary literature on the domestic, with household guides, domestic manuals and conduct books which circulated at the time, instructing householders in the business of the proper government of their households. The play, however, does not unproblematically subscribe to the roles

this moralizing assigns masters and servants. Refraining from condemning a servant who proves a spy, the play, instead, upholds and celebrates his action of spying on his masters as one of good and honest service, as long as its ultimate aim is the cleansing of the patriarchal household from agents of disorder, the expulsion of the woman who undermined the authority of the patriarch, and the restoration of that authority.

I want to first look at early modern theorizing on the domestic, at advice literature, household guides, conduct books, marriage manuals and tracts which were being produced and circulated about the time *A Woman Killed with Kindness* appeared, offering guidance to householders as to how to govern their households. In this section, I ask “what duties were masters and mistresses assigned by early modern commentators and moralists writing on the topic?” This section identifies the ideal image of the well-governed household as early modern English commentators conceived of it, described it and urged householders to model their domestic government on it. In the second section, I read the servant’s act of spying in the play against the background of ideal domestic government thus constructed.

### **The well-governed household**

A house, a seventeenth-century moralist held, is a family, a ‘naturall and simple Societie of certaine persons, hauing mutuall relation one to another’ (Perkins sig. B1v). In this section, I want to look at the early modern English house as a ‘societie’ that enfolds an association of people, a set of human relationships managed by certain domestic rules. I aim to recuperate the framework of assumptions, or what Debora Kuller Shuger calls the ‘habits of thought’ —by which she means ‘a culture’s interpretative categories and their internal relations, which underlie specific beliefs, ideas, and values’—that contemporaries associated with the good government of the household (9). I ask the question: ‘what theoretical patterns of behaviour did

early modern masters, mistresses and domestic servants attach to ideal household government?' Seeking an answer, I consult contemporary household manuals, sermons, treatises, conduct books and domestic guides.

Robert Furse's (1593) advice to his son to '[B]e carefull for your householde [,] use measure yn all thynges'(Greaves 302) was not an isolated instance of a patriarch concerned about proper domestic rule in the period. The good government of the household was a crucial issue for early modern commentators on domesticity. 'In a society where the [state] government depended on householders to maintain order in their establishments,' as Richard L. Greaves observes, 'firm control was necessary' (301). Two contemporary commentators, John Dod and Robert Cleaver, explain why it was thought important that households be well governed:

An houshold is as it were a little Commonwealth, by the good gouernment whereof, Gods glorie may be aduanced, and the commonwealth which standeth of seuerall families benefited; and all that liue in that familie receiue much comfort and commoditie

(sig. A7r).

Order in the state was thought of as dependent on the maintenance of order in the household.<sup>2</sup> The household was configured as a mini-commonwealth,<sup>3</sup> and the state was conceived of as an extended familial realm—a set of families, as Dod and Cleaver state.

The ideal household featured three types of relationships: it is, a contemporary divine wrote in 1600, 'a communion and a fellowship of life between the husband & the wife, the parents & children, and between the master and the seruant' (Vaughan sig. M7r). William Jones (sig. D4r) called those relationships 'couplements,' contending that order in the household is predicated upon the

<sup>2</sup>The household/state analogy originated with Aristotle, preserving its authority throughout the early modern period. See Orlin, p.85.

<sup>3</sup> See Sir Henry Wotton's (sig. L1v) memorable phrase, the household is "a kinde of priuate *Princedome*".

contentment of each 'couplement' member with his or her place in the domestic hierarchy: 'That a familie may be well-ordered, it is requisite that these three couplements which stand in relation each to other, doe keepe their ranke'.

Among the duties commentators assigned the masters of the household to ensure good domestic government was the careful supervision and policing of those who were under their roof, both children and servants. In 1592, the moralists John Dod and Robert Cleaver explained that it was the duty of the household mistress

[...] to order her houshold affaires so carefully that no exercise of religion be hindred, or put out of place, at such time as they should be done in her husband's absence: to see good orders obserued as he hath appointed: to watch ouer the manners and behaiour of such as be in her house, and to helpe her husband in spying out euils that are breeding, that by his wisdom they may be preuented or cured

(sig. D6r)

Such instructions to householders to keep their eyes widely open to watch the behaviour of their domestic servants were triggered by a supposed tendency on the part of servants to be treacherous and deceptive. In the course of recommending remedies for martial disputes, Dod and Cleaver advise: '[l]et it be done priuately betweene themselues, and not before [...] seruants: for they will not sticke to carrie tales [...]. and they will blaze abroad such matters to your discredit' (sig. F4v). Thomas Tusser (sig. D1v) gave a similar instruction: 'No taunts before seruants for hindring thy fame/ No iarring too loude, for auoiding of shame.' A character in Bernard's *Conference*(1612), advises masters and mistresses that "if wrongs bee between them, let themselves between themselves, or with the good liking of a faithful secret friend to both, be ended. They must beware that the houshold become not partners in the matter; for seruants by slander, flattery, and whisperings will kindle the contention, and make a prey of them" (sig. B7v).

Servants are likened to predators that would feed on their masters' misfortunes. In the picture of the ideal household, them, domestic servants emerge as potential sources of disorder that should be kept under careful supervision and strict vigilance lest they indulge themselves in their cherished laziness, trouble-making, gossiping, lewdness and drinking: 'Haue [...] a good eye/ and garde vnto the diligence of your seruantes,' Richard Whitford instructed in 1530 (sig. C8v). Dod and Cleaver's instructions to the household mistress on the duty of watching over her servants verge on a recommendation for spying on their most private conducts and interactions:

She must haue a diligent eye to the behaiour of her seruants, what meetings and greetings, what tickings [sic] and toyings, and what words and countenances there be betweene men and maides, lest such matters being neglected, there follow wantonnesse, yea folly, within their houses, which is a great blemish to the gouernours.

(sigs. F5r-F5v)

'[I]f the eyes of the master and mistresse,' the Puritan preacher William Whately wrote, 'stand not open to see and oppose the faults of those that are vnder them, they will grow bold and licentious, and full of wickednesse' (sig. N4r). Thomas Gataker held that wives' duties include 'the vigilant and watchfull ouersight of the whole family instructing and admonishing them, as occasion requireth' (sig. D2v). In 1619, Whately urged masters and mistresses to 'haue their eyes and minds attentiu vpon the behaiour and carriage of all vnder their rooffe' (sig. N3v).

We have at least one contemporary piece of evidence, unearthed by Orlin (1995), which suggests that strict supervision of, even spying on, household servants was not only theorized but also practised in the period: in 1588, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, sent a young man, 'brought up in my kitchen and prettily entered already' to be trained in a French kitchen. Addressing his letter to the person he hopes will 'place' the servant 'with some good principal cook in Paris,' the Earl

instructs: 'let him know that you have given order that there shall be watch over his behavior and that I have written to you earnestly to advertise me how he shall behave himself. [...] I pray you have an eye to him' (45-6).

To ensure good order in the household, then, masters had to keep their servants under strict vigilance. How about the servants? What space were they assigned on the map of the household? In a well-governed household, rather than constituting a source of disorder, domestic servants uphold order by being obedient to their masters: 'their maine, and most peculiar function, [is] to *obey their masters*,' as William Gouge wrote (sig. Qq6v).

### **Spying as good service in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*:**

In scene vi, when Nick happens to witness the first private encounter between his mistress and Wendoll, conducted in his master's absence from the house, the anguished Nick decides first to 'stab' the villain Wendoll because 'My Master shall not pocket vp this wrong;/ Ile eat my fingers first' (sig. D1r; VI.80-1). As he works through his emotions, though, Nick later decides on another course of action with regard to the betrayal of friendship, trust and matrimony he witnesses: 'Ile henceforth turne a spy,/ And watch them [Mistress Anne and Wendoll] in their close conueyances;' 'Ile haue an eie/ In al their gestures' (sig. D1r; VI.85, 92-3).

Two scenes later Nick has fulfilled his self-set task of spying on the couple and is determined to reveal his news to his betrayed master. Faced by a master surprised to find his servant out of place; 'Nicklas, what make you here Nick? Why are not you/ At supper in the hall there with your fellows?' Nick explains that he 'stayed your rising from the board [i.e. the dinner table]/ To speak with you'(sig. D3r; VIII.21-4). Nick describes his actions both of spying and reporting on his mistress's misconduct as a form of good service, as an expression of love to his master: 'an honourable gentleman. I will not see him wronged,' he confides in the

audience; 'I love you better than your wife./I will make it good,'he promises his master. He stresses his honesty and his determination to act on it as he tells his master:

I knew before  
Twas but a thankles office, and perhaps  
As much as my service or my life is woorth,  
A[ll] this I know, but this and more,  
More by a thousand dangers could not hire me  
To smother such a heinous wrong from you.

(sig. D3r; VIII.68-73).

At this point in the play's development, Heywood puts on stage a household master who is initially incensed by his servant's actions. Enraged by his servant's report, Master Frankford calls Nick 'saucie' and threatens to inflict physical violence on him as indicated by Nick's defiant statement: 'Strike, strike, do strike' (sig. D3r; VIII. 54), and by his insistence on the sense of duty he conceived of himself to be carrying out when he decided to become a spy first and a reporter on his mistress's conduct later: 'I knew before/ Twas but a thankles office, and perhaps/ As much as my service or my life is woorth,' he says. The play, however, quickly deflects this sense of blame of the servant's actions. Master Frankford voices some suspicion after Nick's exit: 'shall I trust/ The bare report of this suspicious groom [?]', only to dismiss these doubts immediately, reminding himself (and by extension, the audience): 'yet he [i.e. Nick] is honest.' In the 'revelation' episode, then, the sense of Nick's action being positive—an action approved by the patriarch is first introduced.

This approval of the servant's actions of spying and deception is confirmed in the concluding movement of the same scene: after Mistress Anne, Wendoll and the rest of the Frankfords' guests withdraw to their beds for the night, Master Frankford summons Nick. The purpose? Not to dismiss the servant or to reprimand him, but rather to ask him to do more of what he has already done: deception. Master Frankford asks his servant to become his confidante, companion and accomplice in

the effort to catch Mistress Anne and her lover unawares and to expose their adulterous liaison. First, he asks the servant to prepare a set of forged keys which will give the two access to the house after night falls and gates and doors are locked: 'get me by degrees/ The keyes of all my doores which I will mold/ In wax, and take their faire impression,/ To haue by them new keyes' (sig. E1v; XIII.221-4). Next, Master Frankford instructs Nick to pose as a player in a meta-theatrical episode that registers the sense of Nick being deceitful: 'At a set hour a [forged] letter shall be brought me—'this letter demanding immediate departure from the house and setting the adulterers up for later discovery (sig. E1v; XIII. 225-7). When this plot is carried out in scene xi, Heywood stresses Nick's ability to perform the *appearance* of being truthful, to act honest—his ability to dissemble: Nick reports on the arrival of a supposed boy with a letter and builds up a fictional story where the boy is waiting in the cellar: answering his master's order to offer the supposed boy a drink, Nick takes it further, 'I'll make him drunk, if he be a Trojan' (sig. F1v; XI.50). This episode brings the servant's dissembling to the forefront and, more importantly, registers the master's approval of the same. The act of deception is not only licensed but also authored by Master Frankford himself.

The sense of the servant's acts of spying and deception being rewarded and celebrated in the play is registered most emphatically in the scenes that follow the discovery of the adultery in scene xiii. While Mistress Anne's and her lover's punishments is exile and banishment from the patriarchal house: 'Go, to thy friend/ A Judas,' Master Frankford, casting himself as a Christ figure, orders his friend. He similarly exiles his wife with all her 'gownes' and 'apparrell,' with everything 'that did euer call thee mistris,' with her 'bed' and 'hangings for a Chamber,' and her 'seruants' (sig. G1r; XIII.66-7, 70, 77). He banishes her to a '[m]annor [house] [of his] seuen mile off' (sig. G1r; XIII.72).<sup>4</sup>The patriarchal household is cleansed from

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<sup>4</sup> Previous critics have seen in Frankford's specification of items of clothing to be sent away with Anne a hint at the possibility that what made Anne fall is supposed womanly frailty, associated with love of beauty, vanity and appearances. See Richardson (2006), p. 167.

everything feminine: 'Why do you search each room about your house,/ Now that you have dispatched your wife away?', asks a friend of Master Frankford's, 'to see that nothing may be left/ That ever was my wife's,' Frankford explains. As the head of the household, then, Frankford exercises his patriarchal powers of excluding those he no longer wishes his house to entertain, Nick remains included. He belongs to the patriarch's house. As Master Frankford orders his wife and servants to depart the house, Nick is only asked to follow his mistress with her lute found after her departure flung in a corner (a symbolic re-playing of his active role in the banishment of his mistress from the house). He is expected to 'return' to the house once his mission has been accomplished: 'I'll ride and overtake her, do my message,/ And come back again,' he promises his master (sig. G4r; XVI.25-6). Nick's deception, dissembling and spying aimed at the preservation of the patriarchal household and the restoration of its head's authority guarantees him a 'coming again,' a return. Nick's actions challenge and subvert contemporary theorizing on the domestic. He clearly feels to abide by Jones's instruction to "keepe [his] ranke," as we saw, performing acts of surveillance and policing that belonged to his masters. The play, however, seems to suggest that as long as the aim of such subversion is the preservation of the patriarchal household, the punishment and exclusion of those who threaten it, and the restoration of the authority of its head they are licensed and approved.

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