When Frankford, the cuckolded husband in Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, suspects his wife Anne of adultery, he chooses to test her fidelity by sitting down to a game of cards with her and her lover, Wendoll. Readers who take note of the scene have observed its emphasis on domestic detail and its intriguing use of card terms as double-entendres. For instance, the name of the game played, Vide Ruff, puns on Anne’s clothing, a symbol of her body and sexuality, and Wendoll’s knave card puns on his deceitfulness—knave being both the honor card we call the Jack as well as a term for a ne’er-do-well. But Vide Ruff is more than simply a symbol in this scene; it is the name of a particular card game whose rules and conventions of play structure the drama of the scene. Why does it matter to the game that Wendoll draws a knave from the deck? What are the implications of Frankford seeking proof of the sexual liaison through a card game rather than, say, a game of chess or, for that matter, through spying or intercepting a letter? Knowledge of card games and the rules of Vide Ruff in particular shed light on these questions, and their answers matter not only for this game scene but for the play as a whole and especially for its commentary on playable media. As *A Woman Killed with Kindness* tells its story about friendship and adultery, it probes the problem of information in social relationships as well as in the theater, itself a kind of social contract between producer and receivers. Conventions of play invite theater audiences—like game players—to manage information in particular ways. In its staging of Vide Ruff, Heywood’s play focalizes on the ways theater is a game of information.

As noted in the Introduction, modern game designer Celia Pearce argues that all games are systems of information, and she theorizes four kinds of information that players have or pursue. There is information known by all the players (e.g., cards laid face-up on the table); information known to only one player (e.g., cards in a player’s hand); information
known to the game only (e.g., when there is a stack of cards lying facedown, for players to draw); and information generated randomly (e.g., from the shuffling of the deck). In all games information crosses from one category to another as the private becomes public, and sometimes vice versa. Indeed, the drama of many games comes from this movement between the known and the unknown. Additionally, variability in information—who knows what and how much is known—distinguishes one game from another. Thus, chess has been categorized as a game of “perfect information” because both players can see the board and its pieces at all times. Cards, by contrast, are used in games of “imperfect information,” since their two-sided design conceals knowledge from players. For Heywood’s scene about a husband trying to find proof of his wife’s adulterous affair, a card game could not be a more ideal choice, particularly when we factor in the state of information for Heywood’s theater audience: they know all about Anne and Wendoll’s affair, but they are unable to see directly what cards are being played in the staged game. Card games, in fact, share much in common with theatrical performance, which similarly engages the unseen and the unknown. As Andrew Sofer puts it, “theater unfolds as a dance between the withheld and the disclosed”; the “dark matter” we cannot see “frames and defines the phenomenology of theatrical pleasure, which both satisfies and frustrates our desire.” Applying the terms of gaming to Sofer’s conception of theater, we might say that theater invites its spectators to play a game of imperfect information. It is perhaps not surprising then that early modern plays productively use card games to explore the circulation of theatrical knowledge—the dance of withholding and disclosure. Although any number of moments in a play might be used to explore theater’s information games, card game scenes are particularly exquisite sites for analysis, because they reveal how the plays not only meditate on the nature of theater (its ontology) but also teach spectators skills for engaging with information in the theater (its epistemology).

Cards are mentioned in about a dozen early modern English dramas and some of these include staged card games. In Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, Part II, a card game played onstage keeps Tamburlaine’s sons from battle. In William Rowley’s A New Wonder, a Woman Never Vexed, cards seem to be played on the balcony or offstage, since there is a stage direction for “a noise above at cards” while the men play dice in 2.1. There even seems to have been a play, now lost, called A Game of the Cards (1582). My focus here will be on two plays, Heywood’s A Woman Killed and Mr. S’s Gammer Gurton’s Needle, which are worth reading in tandem because both are also about friendships that become strained as their par-
Participants withhold information from each other. Although the information presumed to be hidden in the comic *Gammer* (a missing needle) may be far more trivial than the information hidden in *A Woman Killed* (adultery), the plots of both plays present hidden information as a problem for friendship. Friends who hide information cannot be trusted. I want to suggest, however, that both plays also depict friendships as constituted, like card play and theater, by the very uncertainty and imbalances in knowledge that would seem to destroy them. The plays depict social relationships in much the way sociologist Erving Goffman does in scholarship that was, notably, inspired by his fieldwork on card playing in casinos. Goffman describes social relationships as “strategic interactions”: interactants attempt to uncover information that they know their fellow participants are hiding and carefully manage the information they give off about themselves. This interaction is less nefarious than it sounds, for the game of hiding and revealing information is, Goffman points out, a cooperative venture, one that helps reveal the character of each of the participants and solidify their social bond.

My chapter uses the drama of card play to explore what is at stake for our understanding of gaming in social interaction, and vice versa. Although my aim is to shed light on the role of information in producing the social bonds crucial to gaming in any age, I suggest that in order to understand this model of social interaction and its relevance for gaming, it is useful to trace its emergence out of particular historical and cultural conditions. For the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one of the most influential of contexts for understanding friendship as a game of information was humanism. Renaissance humanists adapted from Cicero and other classical authors an idealistic view of true friends as sharing one mind; true friends are said to know each other so well that they become other selves, unable to hide anything from each other. In effect, these writers depict friendship as a game of perfect information. The humanist model of utopian friendship would have been especially familiar to and valued by the audience for whom *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* was first performed: male students at Cambridge University. It is also the model of friendship that Heywood’s male characters cite and pursue in *A Woman Killed*. I argue, however, that both plays critique this idealistic humanist model of male friendship, suggesting that even ideal friendship between equals is necessarily structured, like card play and theater, by gaps in knowledge of the other. Staged card matches in plays are particularly interesting sites of reflection on friendship as an information game. These scenes—their ludic action largely hidden from the audience’s direct
view—engage theater audiences in a game of imperfect information. As such, they invite audiences to feel through theater the sometimes frustrating pleasures that make games and friendships worthwhile. The scenes reveal how theatrical plays, like all playable media, affirm social bonds among participants by providing a pleasurably uncomfortable space to practice navigating social relations.

**IMPERFECT INFORMATION IN GAMMER GURTON’S NEEDLE**

Before turning to the dramas, it is helpful to examine more closely the competencies card games require and teach. Card games encourage participants to derive enjoyment from a state of uncertainty, and anyone who has played cards will be familiar with the rush of emotion in the moment before hidden information is revealed—as a new hand is dealt, an opponent’s card played, the top card of deck flipped over. At the same time, the process of the game, which at every turn involves the revelation of previously unknown information, provokes participants to develop their interpretive skills so that they can figure out hidden information and use it effectively before other participants do. The better participants’ interpretive skills and the more vigorously invested they are in applying interpretations, the more successful they will be in decoding the ludic action and figuring out what information to divulge and when to divulge it. While there are certain cognitive skills that can help a game participant excel in interpretation—for instance, a good memory helps one recall which cards have already been played—what distinguishes mediocre from expert players is both their level of investment in deciphering the game’s secrets and their knowledge of the conventions of the game, conventions that enable participants to reveal and conceal information through particular codes of play. The more one is familiar with the conventions of the game and intent on applying them, the richer one’s interpretive skills and the more hidden information one can ascertain before others. In fact, the most skilled players, having rehearsed thoroughly and internalized the conventions of a particular game, may decipher a fellow player’s secrets almost intuitively, with little or any deliberative cogitation.

The complex game of information that is card play and its implications for spectatorship are well illustrated in the sixteenth century painting *Four Gentlemen of High Rank Playing Primero* by Master of the Countess of Warwick, which depicts four powerful courtiers—believed to be Elizabeth I’s key advisors and friends Francis Walsingham, William Cecil, Henry Carey,
and Walter Raleigh—in the heat of a game of Primero (Figure 12). Each figure is poised to execute his strategy, his fingers fixed on the card he aims to play. The drama of knowing is heightened for the viewer of the painting by its flirtatious revelations and coy occlusions of the game’s status: the leftmost figure shows the viewer the cards he holds and the one he will play, while the rightmost figure openly reveals some of his cards but protectively obscures others, and the two central figures hide their hands entirely. The effect is to draw the viewer vicariously into the drama of the game, offering a glimpse, but only a glimpse, into the ludic experiences of its powerful players. Like each of the figures in the painting, the viewer is invited to decipher who will win this hand without being able to draw any certain conclusions.

The drama of card play works especially well on the theater stage. For like the Primero painting, staged card games extend to spectators the epistemological experience of their represented card players. A comparison between chess and cards helps demonstrate this point. Consider the experience of watching a chess match in its common venue in the early modern period, an intimate interior like a parlor or tavern. Having all of the same basic information as the game’s players, spectators in these venues are invited to play along, projecting themselves into gamers’ decision-making processes: If I were in that seat, what move would I make, and what would its repercussions be? This sort of future-oriented decision-making might be said to constitute a fundamental form of engagement in chess, for players and spectators alike. When a chess game is staged in a theater, as it is at the end of The Tempest, however, the audience has a far different engagement with the game than do the players. As I discuss further in Chapter 4, whereas the onstage players participate in a game of perfect information, the audience, unable to see the board, experience a game of imperfect information.

Card games work differently, for even when played in an intimate space where audiences can see the card table, the game always remains one of imperfect information, inviting not a future-oriented mode of projection, as in chess, but a past-oriented mode of reconstruction. As new information becomes available (e.g., a player throws out a certain card), gamers and their spectators think back to the cards that have already been played (what’s known as “card reading”) in an effort to try to ascertain the content of cards still concealed. This experience of negotiating imperfect information extends to theatrical performances of card games, where both characters and audience grapple with partial knowledge, albeit of different degrees and kinds. Just as players cannot easily know what information their opponents hide, so audiences, positioned at a distance from the staged
GAMING THE STAGE

Game, cannot easily know what cards are being played. Yet through characters’ dialogue and gestures, a staged card game gives off partial information. As private information becomes public, audiences, like onstage gamers, are invited to reconstruct what is known and unknown.

The drama of imperfect information takes a distinctive form in theatrical performance, in comparison with other kinds of fiction (such as novels and films), because theater audiences cannot manipulate their medium to find out information sooner than it is revealed. Like a game, live theater unfolds at its own pace. To be sure, an audience member who has seen or read the play before the performance will know more than someone who has not. But productions of a play differ widely; even the same drama put on by the same actors with the same props can play out differently from one day to the next. Whatever their prior experience with a particular drama, audiences bring to the theater a gamer’s mind-set: they cannot know how this production will play out on every level (plot, actors’ gestures/delivery, stage properties, costumes, etc.), but if the play is at all successful, it will encourage audiences both to relish and to seek to overcome their lack of knowledge, whether through interpretive effort or through less deliberate forms of recollection.

This drama of information is managed in interesting ways in one of the earliest English comedies, *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*, in which the main character, Diccon, uses the language of gaming to unravel and then reconstitute friendships between *Gammer*’s characters simply by convincing them that each friend hides information from the other. *Gammer* sets up this drama of information, tellingly, through a card game, which offers the backdrop for the opening move of Diccon’s scheming, and thus of the plot as a whole.

Diccon has just informed the audience that he plans to “make a play” (2.2.10), a “cleanly prank” (2.2.3), out of an old countrywoman’s distress at having lost her needle. He promises great pleasure to the audience if they will simply let him alone to play his game. Indeed, he wagers his life that the audience will be pleased by his ludic schemes: “If ye will mark my toys, and note, / I will give ye leave to cut my throat / If I make not good sport!” (2.2.16–18). Immediately after this speech, Diccon calls upon Dame Chat, who is engaged in a game of cards, a version of Ruff, inside her alehouse. Coming to greet him at the door, Dame Chat tells Diccon that “We be fast set at trump, man, hard by the fire; / Thou shalt set on the king if thou come a little nigher” (2.2.23–4). She invites Diccon into the home, “a little nigher” [closer] to watch the card game, promising him that he shall see a great trick, the taking of the king. When he declines, saying he does not have time to tarry and wishes only to speak to her, Dame Chat calls into the
house and asks her servant to hold her cards and play in her place: “Doll, sit down and play this game, / And as thou sawest me do, see thou do even the same. / There is five trumps beside the queen” (2.2.27–29). Once alone with Dame Chat, Diccon, feigning reluctance at first, finally agrees to share with her what he claims to be a secret: that the old woman, Gammer, believes Dame Chat has stolen Gammer’s precious cock.

Though it is mentioned quickly and happens offstage, the card game is the perfect ironic backdrop for Diccon’s schemes, which not only spread mistruths, but rely for their effectiveness on other characters’ failures to negotiate imperfect information. Diccon’s lies, which create the comic business of the play, create a false network of hidden information. Diccon convinces Dame Chat to believe that Gammer is hiding, and will soon reveal, her belief that Dame Chat has stolen Gammer’s cock. He then goes to Gammer and convinces her that Dame Chat is hiding Gammer’s needle and is thus a false friend. The women are easily persuaded, never doubting that the other friend acts dishonestly, even though the revelations come from an untrustworthy source, a poor and starving beggar who may be motivated more by material than altruistic motives. The success of Diccon’s schemes rests on the presumption that any friendship, even one that has existed for years, as Dame Chat’s and Gammer’s seems to have done, involves interactants who hide some information from each other. Diccon exploits this state of affairs, simply adding detail and matter to this structure of friendship.

It goes without saying that Diccon is playing games with Dame Chat and Gammer, but to understand these games as more than simple fun for fun’s sake, we need to think more carefully about the kind of games that Diccon favors. Diccon’s character repeatedly uses games of imperfect information, and specifically card play, to explain and manipulate human behavior. When the audience first meets Diccon, he tells us about the scene at Gammer’s house, where “There is howling and scowling, all cast in a dump,” and his only way to make sense of all this “whelling and puling” is to compare it to behavior of card players: it is “as though they had lost a trump” (1.1.11–12). Diccon alludes to the fact that people take their cards far too seriously, agonized by something so trivial. We may at this moment laugh at Diccon for such an absurd analogy—how silly to suggest that the degree of distress he describes could be attributed to the loss of a trump card—but the description turns out to be quite apt, since the distress is caused by the loss of something arguably even more trivial, a needle. And, in fact, Diccon and Mr. S.’s play take games quite seriously; like the needle, games are not trivial at all.
Diccon will use the trump game analogy again later in the play (with the same end rhyme of “dump”). When he is convincing Doctor Rat, the curate, that he has witnessed Dame Chat with the needle, he figures himself as a strategic player in a card game with Dame Chat: “I handled myself so well, / And yet the crafty quean had almost take my trump. / But or all came to an end, I set her in a dump” (4.4.10–12). The card analogy is appropriate here, as Diccon advises the gullible Doctor Rat that negotiating imperfect information requires strategy; though it would make sense for Doctor Rat simply to ask Dame Chat about the stolen needle, Diccon warns Rat against this course of action by figuring Dame Chat as a tactical game player, a case all the more convincing given that Dame Chat does seem to be a fan of games of trumps. Diccon persuades Rat that Dame Chat is well skilled in hiding her cards, and thus the Doctor will need his own strategy, an area in which Diccon, who claims to have already successfully matched wits with the wily Dame Chat, is prepared to assist.

After culminating in the play’s most intense social interaction—a verbal and physical battle between Dame Chat and Gammer Gurton—the game of imperfect information Diccon sets into motion comes to a close with the bailiff forcing all to reveal what has been hidden. At this point, Doctor Rat, the character most humiliated by Diccon’s antics, insists that the bailiff “set him fast” (5.2.234) by which he means to set Diccon in fetters. But Diccon, reminding us that he approaches social relations as games of imperfect information, twists Rat’s meaning, and, taking advantage of a phrase from card playing, asks, “What, fast at cards, or fast on sleep? It is the thing I did last” (5.2.235). Diccon does not simply refuse to admit his wrongdoing; he represents the whole episode as a game of cards, and he asks the audience to do so as well.

In this heavily moralistic drama, Diccon is meant to convey the moral message not only to the villagers of Gurton within the fiction of the play but to the youth of Christ’s College, Cambridge, the audience for the play’s first performance. There was a clear fit between these lessons and the humanist curriculum of the College, and it is not surprising that some literary scholars view the play as epitomizing humanist education. Others have argued, however, that Gammer mocks particular elements of humanism. In particular, the play addresses the social and erotic consequences of Cambridge’s all-male humanist education system, poking fun at its disavowal of women and domesticity. This mockery comes through especially clearly in the culminating moment of the play, when Diccon manages to prick Hodge’s bottom with the long sought-after needle, setting up a comically sodomitical relationship between Gammer’s servant and Diccon. Part of
the joke here, as Wendy Wall discusses, is that Diccon and Hodge are rural, lower-class figures, and their theatrical participation in the homoerotic humanist education system makes them and the system look absurd. It is not just class differences between audience and characters that render the depiction of intimacy comical in this play, but gender differences as well. For the play also encourages its elite male audience to laugh at the friendship between the women depicted in the play, which is a far cry from the sort of ideal friendship that Cambridge’s students would have been reading about in their humanist tomes.

I would suggest that the play displaces onto its female and lower-class characters anxieties about the feasibility of the humanist model of ideal male friendship. As Diccon manipulates the friendship between Dame Chat and Gammer by claiming to be a perfect friend to both women, he occasionally deploys the humanist rhetoric of ideal friendship to secure the trust of the play’s female characters. According to Cicero and early modern essays on friendship by humanist writers such as Francis Bacon and Michel de Montaigne, the friend is a second self who can keep no secrets from the other and who cares for his friend as if he is caring for himself, no matter the risks. Diccon swears this sort of loyalty to Gammer, claiming that when he saw Dame Chat take up the needle, “I spoke in your behalf” (2.4.37), and at some risk, given Dame Chat’s reputation as a “crafty” (2.4.26), wily opponent. Later, he refers in passing to Gammer as his friend when he refuses to tell Rat about the needle-stealing incident he claims to have witnessed. Sharing secrets with one’s friends is a risky endeavor: “there is many an honest man, when he such blasts hath blown / In his friends’ ears, he would be loath the same by him were known” (4.2.46–7). Diccon plays the friend with all his victims, presenting himself as a noble confidant who cannot keep information from his true friends. When he expresses reluctance to share with Dame Chat his secrets about Gammer’s accusations, but ultimately does so, he explains that he could not help but share this information because of his friendship with Dame Chat. As he justifies why friends cannot keep secrets, he recalls a common motif in the humanist discourse of friendship: “Because I know you are my friend, hide it I could not” (2.2.77).

To Cambridge’s university audience, Diccon’s claims to friendship would have already seemed comical. According to the Ciceronian ideal, ideal friendship is found solely between men, and although the classical model of ideal friendship could be taken up and adapted for female friendship, it had little traction in the representation of cross-gender alliances. This was because women were seen to be incapable of, in Montaigne’s
words, the “conference and communication” so central to friendship, a point to which I return later. Additionally (and relatedly) for Cicero and those who adapted his ideas in the early modern period, ideal friendship could flourish only between individuals of similar and high enough status, where neither participant is more economically or socially dependent than the other. Hearing Diccon appeal to true friendship is thus all the more humorous to an audience familiar with humanist rhetoric, for Diccon, a beggar, is the very epitome of need. Hardly pure and unselfish, Diccon’s “friendships” are motivated by his desire for bacon and ale. When we add to this the fact that Diccon’s baring of his soul and secrets is, in fact, the sharing of carefully manufactured lies, Diccon stands as a total mockery of the humanist ideal of friendship. A skilled con artist, Diccon presents himself to victims as playing a game of perfect information with them in order to convince them that they are playing a game of imperfect information with others. He convinces them to take his friendship for granted so as to refocus their attentions on a different interactant, a different game, one that they consequently try to win using information Diccon has provided. In sum, through Diccon, the play invites its predominantly male college audience to interrogate the rhetoric of ideal friendship they have been studying in their books.

To see this critique of classical male friendship play out, we must, however, attend to gaming as more than a metaphor, more than a recurring set of images in Diccon’s language. For at this level—the level of linguistic representation—the play’s critique of idealistic male friendship is circumscribed and limited, as it is displaced onto lower-class women and cross-gender friendship. Since these relationships are always and already disqualified from meeting humanist ideals, they provide a safe and contained way to poke fun at the rhetoric of ideal friendship while leaving its core principals intact for men. But when we pay closer attention to the experience of gaming Gammer presents to its theater audience, the critique of male friendship becomes much more pronounced. Gammer’s audiences were not simply observers of the play; they were active participants, something the staged card game helps to reveal. The play puts pressure on the humanist rhetoric of friendship by engaging its predominantly male audience in a game of imperfect information, at social, dramatic, as well as theatrical levels.

Diccon is at the center of this theater game, for he pretends to be a perfect friend not only to the play’s female characters, but also to theater spectators, ultimately revealing to them, as well, that he has been playing a game of imperfect information. Diccon’s information games with theater spectators begin during the card game scene that initiates his plot. It is no-
table that in that scene *Gammer* makes a virtue out of the necessity that the audience cannot see the cards being played in its staged game of Ruff. Indeed, Dame Chat flaunts the cards hidden from the theater audience’s view when she comes to the door of her alehouse: play *this* game, she tells Doll, pointing to the cards the audience cannot see. As if to further pique the audience’s curiosity, Dame Chat’s interlocutor, Doll, remains hidden from view. These occlusions would have been all the more enticing because audiences at Christ’s College, as was true for most college plays in the mid-sixteenth century, stood close to the stage during performances, sometimes even on it; were *Gammer*’s card game played on the stage instead of off, some audience members would have been able to see Dame Chat’s hand. Staging the game behind a door is thus essential for producing in audiences a state of imperfect information and an interest in overcoming that state. Audiences familiar with Ruff are drawn into vicarious engagement with the offstage card game through partial descriptions of Dame Chat’s hand and her strategy: “There is five trumps beside the queen, the hindmost thou shalt find her” (2.2.29). Dame Chat shows that she has been reading the cards and perhaps is working to flush out all the trump cards, including the queen. This is a common strategy still used today by players of trumps games, like bridge: one attempts to get all the trump cards out of other players’ hands so as to use one’s own trumps to capture other players’ high cards in other suits. The passage works on two contradictory levels. On the one hand, as a double-entendre, the passage shares with the audience privileged information about how *Gammer*’s plot will unfold: Diccon will capture five trumps (Gammer; Cock, her maid; Tib, her servant boy; Hodge; and Rat) in addition to the queen (Dame Chat herself). As double-entendre the passage presents the game as one of perfect information for the audience; they, and only they, are privy to Diccon’s plans. At the level of gameplay, however, the passage offers only partial information, inviting the audience to play the offstage game vicariously by negotiating imperfect information in much the way Dame Chat and Doll do.

This ambivalence epitomizes Diccon’s relationship with the theater audience throughout the drama. For while Diccon set up a game of imperfect information for his villagers, feigning friendship, to the audience he seems to be a true, ideal friend, confiding in playgoers everything there is to know about his plan. And, as we’ll see similarly in the case of Heywood’s *A Woman Killed*, friendship is solidified through the sport of wagering. As he divulges his plans, Diccon repeatedly bets the audience that they will enjoy the game. “Here will the sport begin, if these two [Gammer and Dame Chat] once may meet; / Their cheer, durst lay money, will prove scarcely
sweet!” (2.5.1–2). Diccon invites the audience to a metagame, a wager about the game of imperfect information that Gammer and Dame Chat play, but he promises a definite win: “He that may tarry by it awhile, and that but short, / I warrant him, trust to it, he shall see all the sport” (2.5.7–8). Diccon’s openness assures the audience that they will not be victims of imperfect information in the way the play’s characters are. This offer of full information is echoed more broadly by the play as a whole, whose prologue reveals the entire plot, including the comic ending, where the needle is found in Hodge’s pants.

However, Diccon does not divulge everything to his audience “friends,” and this becomes clear at the end of the play, when the audience discovers they are, in fact, engaged in a game of imperfect information. To appreciate the gamelike structure of this final scene, where Diccon discovers the needle in Hodge’s pants when it pricks his buttock, we need to place into further cultural context what others have identified as the sodomitical symbolism of Diccon’s pricking of Hodge. Another cultural analogue for sticking a needle in someone’s pants was the sixteenth-century game of “prick the belt,” otherwise known as “prick the garter” or “fast and loose.” In the game a piece of leather hide—such as a belt, garter, or thong—is folded and rolled up, the two ends left on the outside. The rolled-up hide is then placed edgways on a table so that the intricate folds are visible to all. The player bets that he can stick a pin or other sharp object through an inside loop so that when the two ends of the belt are pulled apart, the belt will be either caught (fast) or free (loose). This was a well-known shell game in the sixteenth century. The swindler would manipulate the ends of the belt, creating the illusion of a fold in the belt’s middle, and invite the passerby to play what seemed a sure thing. The game was so widely associated with cheating that its name was and continues to be a proverbial expression for dishonest gaming, “playing fast and loose.” References to con artists cheating with the game appear in several early modern dramas. Antony accuses Cleopatra of playing “at fast and loose” (Antony and Cleopatra 4.13.28); Costard contends, “To sell a bargain well is as cunning as fast and loose” (Love’s Labour’s Lost 3.1.92); and Falstaff alludes to the game when he tells Pistol to go off and make some money illegally with a “short knife and a thong” (Merry Wives of Windsor 2.2.17)—the latter being the very item that Hodge has used to mend the pants he wears in Gammer’s final scene.

Allusions to “prick the belt” at this climactic moment of the play deepen its sexual inferences; not surprisingly, the game of fast and loose, with its invitation to “prick” a phallic object through the folds of a leather hide is often a euphemism for copulation, particularly sodomitical, insofar as it is
a *hide* that gets penetrated. If the final scene enacts the game of “prick the belt,” its sexual significance is all the more interesting: in the con game, the swindler symbolically displays his sexual mastery at the expense of the dupe, who is exposed in this zero-sum game as sexually incompetent. Unlike the con artist, the dupe in a game of “prick the belt” fails to recognize whether the phallic object (needle or knife) has penetrated the folds of the hide. Either the dupe fails to wield the needle effectively, believing himself to have penetrated when, in fact, he has missed his target, or, if he is the guesser, he fails to recognize that the needle inserted by the swindler intentionally misses the target. This is no better. Moreover, insofar as the sham is accomplished by the con artist manipulating the ends of a leather hide, the dupe is exposed for failing to know, quite literally, which end is up. In any event the dupe is not only punished financially, but shamed sexually as well.

If Diccon is the swindler working the needle, we may be tempted, as many have been, to read Hodge as the dupe. Looked at more closely in terms of the game, though, Hodge is only a tool for play, providing the leather hide or thong to be “pricked.” Who then is the real dupe? I would suggest that it is the theater audience, who threaten to be shamed by their realization that they, like the characters in *Gammer*, have been lured into a game of imperfect information, for the play has hidden from them key details about its “end.” The prologue ostensibly reveals to the audience that the play will close with Hodge recovering the needle in his pants when it pricks his buttock. But the prologue hides Diccon’s role in the “springing of the game” (5.2.318), presenting the finding of the needle as a matter beyond human agency, “Whether it were by fortune or some other constellation” (l. 16). The audience is thus somewhat surprised, indeed duped, by the ending. This need not be a bad thing, though. If part of the pleasure of theater stems from its status as a game of imperfect information, like cards, the prologue threatens to undermine that by sharing too much, removing all suspense from the plot. Nevertheless, it is notable that the audience must lose the game to experience the theatrical pleasure; they, too, must be duped by Diccon, who here (as elsewhere) stands in for the playwright who crafts the plot. The audience does not need to be pricked in the buttocks to learn this particular lesson; they merely need to watch another hide being pricked. And like other lessons of the humanist classroom, which were driven home through the use of the schoolmaster’s birch rod on the student’s behind, this one is learned through a complex erotic and theatrical economy of shaming and pleasure.

Others have pointed out how this gendered and erotic economy is at
work in *Gammer* and, more important, what it meant to the young male Cambridge audience watching the play. The aim of my reading has been to deepen their trenchant insights by highlighting how *Gammer* uses gaming to create a phenomenology of theatergoing that rivals the classroom in its power to educate about the nature of male intimacy. Watching the needle prick Hodge’s hide, the audience is both uncomfortably and pleasurably shamed by having failed to predict in full the scheme of the plot, of how the ends will be brought about, how, to use Diccon’s terms, the game will be sprung. Duped by Diccon into a false confidence about their access to dramatic information, they come to learn through loss of a little dignity the joy of not knowing and of trying to uncover what is unknown. In certain games, as in certain dramas and, yes, certain personal relationships, that is a key site of pleasure even as it is a source of anxiety.

Notably, the play condones Diccon’s actions, even though he uses cheating to convey this lesson. Leaving him unpunished for his insubordination and trickery, the play rewrites Diccon’s cheating as successful gamesmanship. Indeed, the play treats Diccon’s cheating in much the way Dame Chat treats the cheating of her fellow card players. When Dame Chat asks Doll to play on her behalf, she counsels: “Take heed of Sim Glover’s wife—she hath an eye behind her!” (2.2.30), perhaps an allusion to the fraud scheme described in *Mihil Mumchance* (1597) and illustrated in Figure 13, Aelbert Jansz. van der Schoor’s *Cardsharps in an Interior* (1656), where a mirror is placed behind the swindled opponent so that the cheater can see the opponent’s cards in the mirror’s reflection. Dame Chat does not accuse her opponent of cheating, even though she is quite certain of this (she *hath* an eye behind her, not she might have an eye behind her); instead Dame Chat plays more warily, advising Doll to do the same. Alliances, whether social or theatrical, are not about revealing everything; they are about recognizing that others are playing a game of imperfect information, too, and that, to put this in Goffman’s terms, one’s ethical responsibility is not to call out a fellow player’s strategies or even foul play, but rather to keep the interaction going, playing along one step *ahead* of one’s interactants. Like Dame Chat, *Gammer*’s audience must play a game of imperfect information with a cheater whose behavior cannot be publicly exposed lest the game be disrupted completely.

The pleasures of playgoing are as complex and ambivalent as those of card games and of friendship. Playgoers risk being shamed by lack of knowledge, for committing to the play, being willing to see it through, can mean risking one’s own butt, as it were, and accepting that that in the end, the play may “leave you behind” (5.2.331), as *Gammer* almost does.
Playgoing, like male friendship, even as it nurtures bonds between interactants, renders their relations precarious and risky; for theater thrives, as does friendship, on participants’ willingness to hide and seek out hidden information.

CARDS, THEATER, AND MALE FRIENDSHIP AT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY

The students of Christ’s College may have been especially amenable to a play that used cards to convey this message, especially if the play was, like so many other mid-sixteenth-century comedies, performed during the Christmas season. As mentioned in Chapter 1, cards were a central part of Christmas revels, and they would have become even more closely associated with Christmas following the 1541 edict that restricted servants, apprentices, and other laborers from playing cards outside Christmastime. At some points in its history, Cambridge University explicitly forbade card play among students, allowing fellows from Christ’s and St. John’s colleges to indulge in cards only during the Christmas holiday. One explicit reason for laws against card play was the concern that cards and other sitting pastimes would promote idleness, and that recreations ought to be of a more active sort. Yet another reason may have been that cards were the epitome of an emerging commodity culture that was heavily critiqued by Cambridge social reformers, who believed that such imported commodities threatened traditional social bonds and English national identity. Similar sorts of criticism of playing cards can be heard throughout England in the early modern period. As discussed in the previous chapter, monarchs and governing bodies, under pressure from English card makers, outlawed the importation of playing cards, which generally came to England from France. But their laws had little effect, and French cards continued to flood the English market. There is material evidence of these imported cards at Cambridge University: playing cards from the early 1630s from two different decks, one of which is marked with the name of the French card manufacturer Jean Desmarests, were found buried in a staircase at Trinity College. And however much they were disparaged by legal and moral authorities, cards continued to be played throughout the sixteenth century. Recall that Henry VIII’s 1541 statute did not restrict the card playing of higher-status groups, including noblemen and gentlemen, and it even allowed these men to license their servants and children to play cards within the grounds of the master’s house. Card playing remained
acceptable to many Cambridge leaders, too. So much so that when Protestant Reformer William Ames, a fellow at Christ’s College, preached against playing cards and dice in 1610, he was pressured to resign from the university under threat of expulsion.37

Hardly a straightforward emblem of vice for students and fellows at Christ’s College,38 cards may even have had a decidedly positive valence, serving as symbols of spiritual self-knowledge and, of particular relevance to my subject here, Christian fellowship. At the time Gammer was likely performed at Cambridge, students could, through the allusion to playing cards, recall their connection to one of Cambridge’s most famous preachers, Hugh Latimer, who had reemerged in the 1550s as a powerful voice of the Protestant Reformation. Latimer’s rise to power two decades earlier had coincided with his having delivered his groundbreaking “Sermons on the Card” at Cambridge. The sermons had ignited major controversy in 1529, using the analogy of card playing both to demand the Bible be translated into English and to underscore the importance of Christian fellowship—the latter claim inviting the fury of Cambridge’s church conservatives in that it prioritized social service over “voluntary works” like building churches, lighting candles, and going on pilgrimages. The second of Latimer’s sermons was delivered directly in response to Robert Buckenham of the Dominican Friars, who, according to John Foxe’s expanded Actes and Monuments (1583), sat right under the pulpit gritting his teeth.39 The message of Latimer’s sermons is that true devotion to Christ and spiritual salvation come through the building and maintenance of social bonds. And although Catholics and traditionalists had long associated friendship with Christianity—the Eucharist having served as a space for sworn brotherhood rituals40—Latimer’s sermons urge parishioners to mend and create social bonds before coming to church, not just inside it. Even more to my purpose here, Latimer’s sermons use a game of trumps to elucidate this message.

Latimer claims to be using the trumps game analogy to appeal to his audience members, who, he realizes, are about to play cards during the Christmas season. Faced undoubtedly with distracted auditors as he attempts to explain Christ’s teachings, Latimer engages, instead of fighting, students’ current preoccupations. He presents himself as playing a game of cards with his auditors:

I will apply myself according to your custom at this time of Christmas: I will, as I said, declare unto you Christ’s rule, but that shall be in Christ’s cards. And whereas you are wont to celebrate Christmas in playing at cards, I intend, by God’s grace, to deal unto you Christ’s
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cards, wherein you shall perceive Christ’s rule. The game that we will play at shall be called the triumph, which, if it be well played at, he that dealeth shall win; the players shall likewise win; and the standers and lookers upon shall do the same; insomuch that there is no man that is willing to play at this triumph with these cards, but they shall be all winners, and no losers.

The good Christian must, like any game player or spectator, know the rules of the game, in this case “Christ’s rule.” Latimer then proceeds to describe the value of two of the “cards” in the deck, both of which mediate relations between friends and neighbors. One “card” cautions against giving into one’s “Turks,” emotions of anger that can lead to bickering with others and, in the worst circumstances, committing violence against them. The second, closely related “card” compels the good Christian to mend any broken friendships before offering oblations to God. As a pair the sermons emphasize the spiritual value of forgiving one’s enemies and of not letting petty conflict get out of hand—in short, of building and nurturing social alliances. Latimer does not simply elucidate these “cards,” he advises his hearers in how to use them in play:

Now I trust you wot what your card meaneth: let us see how that we can play with the same. Whenssoever it shall happen you to go and make your oblation unto God, ask of yourselves this question, “Who art thou?” The answer, as you know, is, “I am a christian man.” Then you must again ask unto yourself, What Christ requireth of a christian man? By and by cast down your trump, your heart, and look first of one card, then of another. The first card telleth thee, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not be angry, thou shalt not be out of patience. This done, thou shalt look if there be any more cards to take up; and if thou look well, thou shalt see another card of the same suit, wherein thou shalt know that thou art bound to reconcile thy neighbour. Then cast thy trump upon them both, and gather them all three together, and do according to the virtue of thy cards; and surely thou shalt not lose.41

Latimer compares the important work of seeking spiritual self-knowledge to the taking of a trick in a game of “triumph,” another name for games of trumps such as Ruff. The parishioner’s game is, like any card game, about negotiating imperfect information. When coming to prayer, parishioners experience a state of uncertainty. They do not have all the information
needed for spiritual salvation and must, like the Pharisees who wondered whether Saint John the Baptist was the savior they needed to worship, ask “Who are thou?” The question is central to Latimer’s sermons, which use this parable and its query for information as their launching point. But, Latimer implies, if salvation is a game of imperfect information like Trumps, it can be won if players understand the value of the cards, watch what is played by others, and use their “trump” cards effectively. The analogy works on a fairly simple level here. The suit of hearts is trumps; thus to win the trick and take both of the other cards, the Christian need only look carefully at the two cards and throw down a “heart,” which conveniently is both a suit in card play and the bodily organ associated with Christian faith. In effect, Latimer was suggesting that parishioners could have an intimate relationship with God by treating this relationship as one of imperfect information—a claim that would have resonated powerfully during the Reformation years, as Protestants emphasized a more direct instead of mediated connection to God.

The sermons were so controversial that Latimer came under attack after delivering them. Yet just when Latimer’s Cambridge career, and perhaps more, was to be lost, King Henry VIII, having heard that Latimer supported his cause for divorce, came to the preacher’s defense. His critics silenced, Latimer was soon invited to preach before Henry VIII, ultimately being promoted to Bishop of Worcester in 1535. Though Latimer’s position of authority during Henry’s reign waxed and waned—at the time of Henry’s death, Latimer was committed to the Tower—he emerged afresh as a popular preacher in the early 1550s when Edward VI took the throne and when Gammer was being written and performed. Thus, when Mr. S.’s play uses the card game as an analogy for friendship, this may have had special, timely resonance for Cambridge’s clerically minded student audience.

In linking Mr. S.’s play with Latimer’s sermons, my goal here is not to argue that the play is a religious parable in disguise, though it may well be: certainly the play’s villagers are guilty of indulging in petty conflict with friends. Nor do I aim to offer further evidence for the play’s anti-Catholicism. For though Protestant Reformers used playing cards to spread their religious ideas—as is attested by a 1603 German deck of educational cards that teach biblical history and by Luther’s own use of the card game as spiritual metaphor on at least three occasions—many Protestant preachers also criticized card play, and, as discussed in Chapter 1, royalist writers with more conservative religious views were just as quick to use cards as witty metaphors for their cause. As well, Catholics were as eager as Protestants to find pedagogical value in card play. Rather than
CARDS linking the metaphorical and practical value of playing cards to a particular moral, religious, or political perspective, I am interested in the fact that for a Cambridge student audience in particular, the game of cards was an ideal vehicle for investigating social relationships as information games. Like Latimer’s sermon, *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* trades on commonplace views of card playing as a vice in order to deliver its moral punch about social alliances. Playing cards may well be dangerous commodities, threatening English livelihood and corrupting good men; nevertheless, they have the potential not only to destroy social bonds, but also to create them. The play, like Latimer, shows its audiences that imperfect information about another is cause not simply for anxiety but for pleasure and even spiritual joy. Pleasure comes not from the commodity item itself, but from its employment in social relationships. Alone, a card is a card, a needle—a needle—just another commodity item. When it is put into use, however, the card, like the needle, can become a vital part of the community and a mode for securing social connection.

The resultant bonds are powerful but also vulnerable, not unlike the kind of faith that Latimer preaches. For even the most rule-bound of card games is still a game of imperfect information, where some of what needs to be known is hidden. The card game, like a friendship, creates epistemological challenges and, thus, leaves interactants vulnerable to being bamboozled by wiliier players, who can manipulate imbalances in knowledge to their advantage. As is elucidated in the next section’s reading of *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, cheating, defined broadly, is, in fact, built into the rules of card games, as it is into friendship. And thus imbalances in information are inevitably vulnerable to exploitation. These opportunities and anxieties around interaction are undoubtedly there in any social relationship. But they are a particular source of concern for the young men who first watched *Gammer* and who are depicted in *A Woman Killed*. Insofar as their claims to masculinity were reliant on creating and maintaining homosocial alliances, friendship mattered deeply. A fraudulent friend could be a man’s social and financial undoing. For early modern men in particular, then, there was a lot at stake in being able to negotiate a relationship of imperfect information.

**IMPERFECT FRIENDSHIP IN A WOMAN KILLED WITH KINDNESS**

Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* dramatizes those stakes, as it depicts the rise and fall of a friendship between two men who, tragically, love the same woman. Like *Gammer*, much of the plot of Heywood’s play is
concerned with hidden information, in this case about Wendoll’s adulterous affair with Frankford’s wife, and the question of when and how that information will come to light, and what Frankford will do when all is revealed. A pivotal scene in this drama of information is the staged card game through which Frankford hopes to test his recently acquired suspicions; he engages in a tabletop game of imperfect information in order to solve problems of imperfect information in his friendship and his marriage. I want to focus in particular on how the card game draws the play’s audience into an experience of negotiating imperfect information by inviting them to play the staged card game vicariously. Although, unlike Frankford, spectators know that Wendoll and Anne have been having an affair, they, like Frankford, learn over the course of the game scene that Wendoll and Anne—who are partners in the card game against Frankford and another friend—are also cheating at cards, exploiting the differences in knowledge that motivate routine card play, and friendship too.

When Frankford first alludes to Wendoll’s cheating during the card game, the accusations are subtle and the cause specious enough that Frankford seems to refer only to Wendoll’s adulterous affair. Before the game begins, each character draws from the deck to determine the dealer. Though the audience cannot see and thus does not know what card Frankford draws, the fact that he wins the right to deal after Wendoll and Anne draw a Knave and Queen, respectively, indicates that Frankford draws something of higher value. As he takes the card deck, Frankford observes, “They are the grossest pair that e’er I felt” (8.170). Beyond its implications as a double-entendre reference to the adulterous couple, Frankford intimates that the card deck, referred to in this period as a “pair,” feels “gross,” or rough, an allusion perhaps to dirty, marked cards. Charles Cotton’s *The Compleat Gamester* (published in 1674) explains how cards may be marked by nicking their edges: “take a pack of Cards and open them, then take out all the Honours, that is . . . the four Aces, the four Kings, &c. then take the rest and cut a little from the edges of them all alike, by which means the Honours will be broader than the rest.” The honor cards in such a marked deck protrude just slightly, undoubtedly rendering the pack “gross” to the touch. That Wendoll and Anne should both draw honor cards, and ones so befitting of their promiscuous sexuality (knave and queen, a pun on “quean,” are both terms of slander conveying sexual criminality), is somewhat suspicious but by no means confirms dishonest play, especially since it is usually the dealer who benefits from using marked cards. At the same time, though, the conventions of card play imply that Frankford’s designation as dealer leaves Anne in charge of cutting the deck and Wendoll in
charge of shuffling: “Shuffle, I’ll cut” (8.171), says Anne.\textsuperscript{50} While, again, there is nothing immediately suspicious about these actions, they do, as Cotton’s exposition on card sharks explains, put Anne in the position to place high honor cards strategically in the deck so as to help her partner, Wendoll—a point to which I return below.

Once the cards are shuffled, cut, and dealt, the game begins, and Frankford reports having “lost my dealing” (8.172), to which Wendoll responds, “Sir, the fault’s in me. / . . . / Give me the stock” (8.173–75). More than a double-entendre in which Wendoll admits his fault in the affair, the line can be interpreted from the game’s perspective as indicating that Wendoll has the ace of trumps (the most valued suit in the game) in his hand and wins the right to “ruff the stock”—or exchange any of the cards in his hand for those in the pile of four left on the table after all the other cards have been dealt. As the game proceeds and Wendoll’s good luck builds, the characters refer more repeatedly to the conclusion that Wendoll is cheating. On one level, to be sure, Wendoll’s double-entendres and asides concerning cheating pertain to his affair with Anne, but the scene invites audience members who attempt to play the game vicariously another interpretation of the lines: that they pertain to Wendoll’s performance in the card game itself. The next game action the audience can ascertain comes from Frankford’s declaration, “My mind’s not on my game. / . . . / You have served me a bad trick, Master Wendoll” (8.175–77). Someone familiar with Vide Ruff will know that Frankford appears to have lost the trick he led to Wendoll, who has now led with or “served” a card that Frankford cannot beat, “a bad trick.” After Wendoll responds, “Sir, you must take your lot. To end this strife, / I know I have dealt better with your wife” (8.178–79), Frankford offers the audience the first clear indication that he suspects Wendoll is cheating at cards: “Thou has dealt falsely then” (8.180). For Wendoll to be sure his card will win the trick, he must have some knowledge of Anne’s hand, impossible unless they have illicitly shared information.

As the trick concludes, Frankford communicates to the audience absolute certainty about Wendoll’s cheating. Anne, who is to put down her card after Frankford,\textsuperscript{51} asks, “What’s trumps?”; Wendoll answers “Hearts” and, presumably after Anne and Cranwell (Frankford’s partner) play their cards, Wendoll takes the trick, “I rub” (8.182). Engaging a homonymic pun on “rub,” Frankford responds in an aside,

\begin{quote}
Thou robb’st me of my soul, of her chaste love;  
In thy false dealing, thou hast robbed my heart.
\end{quote}
Booty you play; I like a loser stand,  
Having no heart, or here, or in my hand. (8.183–86)

and then he abruptly ends the game, claiming illness.

While the lines obviously work metaphorically in a cuckoldry plot—Wendoll has stolen Frankford’s one true love, his “heart”—an audience following the dramatic arc of the game can interpret them as indicating that when Wendoll wins the trick, he takes Frankford’s sole trump card. Why would this confirm Frankford’s suspicions of cheating? A spectator playing vicariously might reconstruct the action of the trick as follows: That Frankford loses a trump card and still loses the trick tells us that Wendoll had to have led with hearts. For if Wendoll had led with any other suit, Frankford’s lone heart card could have trumped it. So we know that Wendoll leads with a heart and that Frankford follows with a lower-valued heart. What does Anne play? The fact that she asks the group, “What’s trumps?” after Wendoll has led with hearts suggests she doesn’t have any hearts in her hand. If she did, she would, by the rules of the game, have to play hearts and wouldn’t have the option to play the trumps suit. That she, apparently forgetting trumps is hearts, considers playing trumps tells us that she doesn’t have hearts in her hand. If Anne has no hearts, and Frankford just played his last one, then Wendoll and Cranwell have the rest of the hearts from the deck between them. Cranwell’s hearts, if he has them, are, however, clearly lower in value than Wendoll’s. This tells us that Wendoll has all of the highest trumps in the pack and, thus, should take every or almost every remaining trick. Frankford’s subsequent outburst and sudden decision to end the game has been read by critics as evidence of his uncharacteristic loss of control, but from the perspective of the card game, Frankford has simply realized not only that he and Cranwell have no chance of winning because Wendoll’s cards are too good, but that Wendoll most likely had to have cheated in order to achieve such a hand.

For someone familiar with Vide Ruff, the cheating scheme would be fairly self-evident in retrospect: through marked cards and some sleight-of-hand techniques, Wendoll managed to win the ace of trumps and place the next four highest heart cards at the bottom of the deck before it was dealt. Such a scenario would have given him an unbeatable hand, for the ace wins him the right to ruff the stock so that he would then hold the five top trumps. For Wendoll to have arranged the marked cards in such a way, though, especially in a hand that he did not deal, he would have to have had Anne as an accomplice, for it is she who cuts the deck before Frankford deals, strategically ensuring that these cards will be at the bottom of the
deck and thus in Wendoll’s stock. Frankford’s furious aside, “Booty you play,” is then directed to both Wendoll and Anne, who have joined in league to victimize him through false play.\(^\text{54}\) We may be tempted to interpret this fraudulent action as yet another great double-entendre: Wendoll and Anne have cuckolded Frankford, so it is not surprising that they should extend their treachery into a card game. But cheating at cards is more than an allegory for or extension of cuckoldry; it is a metacommentary on the epistemologies of gameplay and male friendship.

Heywood’s audience may be just as surprised by Wendoll’s cheating as Frankford is, for spectators, too, are participants in the game Wendoll plays. To be sure, we witness Wendoll wooing Anne and thus betraying his friend, but he has until this point presented himself to Anne and the play’s audience as a hapless victim of love who cheats his friend because his emotions get the better of him. When Wendoll decides to declare his affection for Anne, he appears the quintessential melancholic lover: indecisive, overly dramatic, conflicted, distracted. He delivers a heartfelt series of soliloquies about his plight, deciding that he cannot help but give in to his feelings. His confession begins like those of Shakespearean villains Richard III or Lear’s Edmund when they soliloquize on their innate evilness, “I am a villain.” But Wendoll quickly changes course, presenting his lack of loyalty to Frankford as a regrettable option, not an expression of inner villainy:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I am a villain if I apprehend} \\
\text{But such a thought; then, to attempt the deed—} \\
\text{Slave, thou art damned without redemption.} \\
\text{I’ll drive away this passion with a song.} \\
\text{A song! Ha, ha! A song, as if, fond man,} \\
\text{Thy eyes could swim in laughter when thy soul} \\
\text{Lies drenched and drowned in red tears of blood.} \ (6.1–7)
\end{align*}
\]

For those who read the play as essentially a morality drama, Wendoll is a straightforward villain, but the representation of his treachery is far more complex.\(^\text{55}\) The card game urges that Wendoll also be read, like Diccon in Gammer Gurton’s Needle, as a skilled swindler. In retrospect, his melancholic soliloquies appear a calculated attempt to portray himself to audiences as committed to love, not cheating.

My purpose in presenting this reading of Wendoll is not to substantiate the view of him as the play’s Vice figure or to trace some sort of consistency in character that would fulfill realist expectations for drama. Rather, I am interested in the play’s use of the card game to reveal to the theater audience
that Wendoll’s character cheats, which leads spectators beyond ethics in contextualizing his foul play. By exposing Wendoll’s rooking to the audience only after Frankford discovers it, and only through the game’s dramatic arc, the play asks its audience to consider Wendoll’s foul play less as a reflection of villainous character than as an epistemological problem. The card game insists audiences reconsider the degree to which they, like Frankford, can “know” Wendoll.56 Significantly, Wendoll’s performance of intimacy with theater spectators puts them in an analogous position to Frankford.

Other early modern plays about infidelity have the audience identify with the jealous husband, paradoxically by structuring the plot so that the audience knows about the cheating before the husband does.57 But Heywood’s card game produces a disparity between audience and characters that is the inverse of the “dramatic irony” in the play’s larger plotline. Whereas the audience knows about the affair before Frankford and other characters do, in the case of the card game, the audience—who cannot see any of the cards on the staged game table—sees and thus knows less than Frankford does. If the gap in knowledge between protagonist and audience ordinarily prompts interpretive work on the part of the protagonist (the play’s plot concerns his efforts to uncover the adultery), then, I would suggest, the card game shifts this interpretive work away from Frankford’s character and toward the theater audience.58 Spectators of a game they cannot see completely and whose moves are available to them only through snippets of dialogue, the audience is called upon to reconstruct the moves of the card game, negotiating imperfect information in much the way the characters onstage do. As a consequence, the audience’s theatrical experience of the play doesn’t map neatly onto the movement of its plot: while the plot builds toward what most would consider the climactic scene of the play—the bedroom discovery scene—the climax of theatrical engagement and participation is, in fact, the card game scene.

This has important implications for how we understand the play’s treatment of male friendship and its relationship to marriage—social bonds that A Woman Killed invites the audience to explore through play. Many have read A Woman Killed as a “domestic” drama about a breakdown in a marriage, whereas others maintain it is a friendship play about male homosexuality and a breakdown in kinship networks.59 Male friendship and marriage are not mutually exclusive, however, and the card game reveals the complex intersections between them. Well before Frankford discovers his wife in bed with Wendoll, he discovers Wendoll colluding with Anne to cheat Frankford at cards. How exactly does this cheating at cards threaten Frankford’s friendship with Wendoll? To answer this, we might recall
again the idea that cards are used in games of imperfect information, structured around imbalances in players’ knowledge. Male friendships were seen to be similarly grounded in gaps in knowledge between participants, a situation Wendoll exploits in and out of the card game.

My claim that, in operative terms, friendship is grounded in lack of knowledge of the other would appear to conflict with the humanist ideal of male friendship, wherein the friend is considered another self and knowledge of the other is complete and immediate. But I would suggest that this discourse of ideal friendship, even in its purest rhetorical form, recognizes imbalances of information at the heart of true friendship. Toward the end of his classical essay on friendship *De amicitia*, Cicero, notably using a game analogy, warns his readers about false friends who can hoodwink even the most upstanding and self-composed of men. The danger of such a false friend is that he is “not very easily recognized, since he often assents by opposing, plays the game of disputing in a smooth, caressing way, and at length submits, and suffers himself to be outreasoned, so as to make him on whom he is practising his arts appear to have had the deeper insight. But what is more disgraceful than to be made game of?” Cicero is so repelled by the notion that friendship is a game that can be manipulated by cheaters that his essay quickly retreats from this line of thought. “But I know not how my discourse has digressed from the friendships of perfect, that is, of wise men,—wise, I mean, so far as wisdom can fall to the lot of man,—to friendships of a lighter sort. Let us then return to our original subject, and bring it to a speedy conclusion.” The skilled rhetorician suddenly appears to have lost control of his discourse. Momentarily stepping down from the lofty ideals he has described throughout the essay, Cicero grapples briefly with the messy mundane practice of friendship, and he is horrified by what he finds. For Cicero’s ideal friendship to work, each of the interactants must know the other entirely. The deepest character of the one must be easily legible to the other. But, Cicero’s digression considers, what if the other cannot be fully known? Rather than take up this question in much detail, he quickly retreats to the rhetoric of ideal friendship, wrapping up the essay before it can realize the practical implications of the ideas just introduced.

Some early modern writings on ideal male friendship take up, with less anxiety than Cicero, how even ideal friendship may be structured by games of imperfect information. They observe that friends who attain perfect knowledge of each other gain that knowledge through the act of sharing privately held information or secrets—a process, ironically, dependent on momentary imbalances in knowledge about the other. In an early French
treatise on Christian friendship—whose English translation by Thomas Newton was published in 1586, bound, perhaps not coincidentally, with a treatise on gaming—Calvinist theologian Lambert Daneau highlights the centrality of such sharing to “perfect Friendship tearmed Amicitia” which relies upon “the familiar conversation of friends,” for it is through “familiar conversation” that “liking and affection is usually encreased, strengthened, and made greater.”

In true Christian friendship the affections of each man for the other “may not bee smoothered in secrecie, or kept unknowne, but be apparaunted, made open and manifested” as “the one uttereth and testifieth to the other.”

Michel de Montaigne’s “On Friendship” (translated in 1603 by John Florio) posits a similar direct correspondence between the sharing of secrets through conversation and the growth of affection: he writes that the minds of him and his friend “have with so fervent an affection considered of each other, and with like affection so discovered and sounded, even to the very bottome of each others hearts and entrails, that I did not only know his, as well as mine owne, but I would (verily) rather have trusted him concerning any matter of mine than my selfe.”

To be sure, the emphasis of the passage is on the men’s unity of mind, but Montaigne also alludes to the mundane means through which this mutual knowledge has been attained: through making “discovered and sounded” information from “the very bottome of each others hearts and entrails.” Francis Bacon’s essay “On Friendship” calls this act of divulging privately held information the first “fruit” of friendship. Encouraging remedies that open the body, thereby preventing diseases caused by blockages, he advocates the humoral healthfulness of friendship: “no receipt openeth the heart but a true friend, to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it, in a kind of civil shift or confession.”

At the center of the humanist ideal of friendship, then, is the quite ordinary work of “confession”: imparting private thoughts and feelings to someone else. Indeed, the act of imparting or sharing, of making known what isn’t known, affirms that the relationship between two people is, in fact, a friendship. Or, to put this another way, friendship involves actively bridging a gap in knowledge about the other. Ironically, then, if the action of friendship is the mutual sharing of secrets, friends need not divulge everything at once; they must have secrets in order to share them and thereby enable a performance of friendship.

Bacon’s “civil shift or confession” might also be thought of in terms of modern sociologist Erving Goffman’s “interaction ritual,” a social encounter that is structured by certain (usually unwritten and underrecognized)
rules. While Goffman is not interested in friendship per se, but rather in any social interaction, his perspective helps to highlight what is at stake in the exchange of information to which Daneau, Montaigne, and Bacon allude. Goffman views social interactions as moments of “mutual monitoring” through which each interactant has the opportunity to introduce “favorable information” about him- or herself. Interaction rituals are the means through which friends come to recognize each other as friends, if only because they use the encounter as an opportunity to, in Bacon’s terms, “impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes,” and so forth. But Goffman importantly points out that these interactions are games, often zero-sum games at that. Each participant strategically chooses what information to impart and when to do it. While monitoring what they communicate, interactants also attempt to uncover information about others, sometimes resorting to spying to draw out concealed secrets. Hiding and withholding information from interactants, like spying, is not the mark of an unethical cheater but a necessary part of play, the assumption here being that every interaction, and the relationship that is created through it, is structured and, indeed, bolstered by gaps in knowledge about the other.

Such gaps are at the foundation of Wendoll and Frankford’s relationship. When Frankford first mentions an interest in offering Wendoll “a second place” in the household and “my best regard” (4.34), he appears to know very little about the man.

This Wendoll I have noted, and his carriage
Hath pleased me much. By observation
I have noted many good deserts in him:
He’s affable, and seen in many things,
Discourses well, a good companion,
And though of small means, yet a gentleman
Of a good house, somewhat pressed by want. (4.26-34)

Frankford has judged Wendoll’s fitness for a more intimate friendship through “observation,” having “noted . . . his carriage,” or conduct. And readers of the play tend to be surprised by his decision soon after to offer everything, “table and . . . purse” (4.64), to a person who seems, at this point, merely a good acquaintance. Yet Frankford has begun to decipher the information Wendoll gives out, at the very least his “carriage.” And, if we consider friendship as a game of imperfect information, then part of what attracts Frankford to Wendoll is the challenge and excitement of not knowing all there is to know about this man; Wendoll has secrets yet to be
Most important, Wendoll presents himself as someone willing to share that information. The timing of Frankford’s offer of friendship makes sense then: just after Wendoll informs Frankford of the fatal hawking wager that has led Frankford’s brother-in-law, Sir Francis Acton, to take legal action against Frankford’s friend Sir Charles Mountford.

Immediately after thanking Wendoll for delivering the bad news, Frankford extends his friendship:

I thank your pains, sir. Had the news been better
Your will was to have brought it, Master Wendoll.
Sir Charles will find hard friends; his case is heinous,
And will be most severely censured on.
I am sorry for him. Sir, a word with you.
I know you, sir, to be a gentleman
In all things, your possibilities but mean.
Please you to use my table and my purse,
They are yours. (4.57–65)

The midline shift from Frankford speaking of Sir Charles’s plight to extending unbounded friendship seems puzzling at first, an apparent non sequitur. But the two seemingly different topics of this speech are intertwined, the former explaining the latter. When Wendoll shares his knowledge of the wager debacle, an event in which he was deeply implicated, he appears to unburden his heart and mind to Frankford and thus act as a true friend. Indeed, Frankford’s transition from praising Wendoll for sharing this news to offering Wendoll friendship comes by way of an observation that Sir Charles, by contrast, “will find hard friends.” In sum, the cognitive and emotional experience of male friendship is quite similar to that of a game of cards: friends, like card players, choose to engage in a relationship where parts of the self are hidden from the other, to be divulged over the course of the relationship. By divulging unknown information, friends, like card players, demonstrate their willingness to participate in the social interaction.

But if Wendoll and Frankford’s friendship is like a card game, its pleasure stemming from each participant withholding and then strategically divulging privately held information to the other, then it is also worth noting that these acts of confession serve an overall competitive scheme. At the end of the game, Goffman reminds us, one side will win, and the other will lose. Such contest, Heywood’s play suggests, is as central to male friendship as it is to card games. The surest evidence of that is the play’s earlier
hunting wager scene, another staging of recreation where suspicions of cheating threaten male friendship. Like the card game, the hunting wager apparently is an opportunity for homosocial bonding. After Frankford and Anne’s wedding, the gentlemen guests gather to contemplate how they may best celebrate. Sir Francis, observing that the servants are enjoying their “rounds and jigs,” asks the other men, “What shall we do?” (1.85). The answer is a falconry wager between Sir Francis and Sir Charles, to be undertaken the next day, with all the men participating by laying bets on one side or the other. At this point, there is no reason to presume that the contest will destroy male homosocial bonds, for part of the pleasure of a game, like a male friendship, stems from its competitive nature. Contemporary game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman point out that while games are competitive, they are simultaneously cooperative: “To play a game is to submit your behavior to the rules of the game, to enter into the time and space that the game demarcates,” to enter what they call a “lusory attitude.”

The problem in the case of the card game and the hawking match is that Wendoll, like many gamers, does not abide by the borders of a lusory, “magic circle.” He invents his own rules, creating and moving information in ways that exceed the game’s design. He thus points to the ways friendships grounded in playful contest are vulnerable, for they rely on, but cannot ensure, consensus and cooperation between the parties.

The hawking scene bears out the limitations of the terms of male friendship. When Sir Charles wins the contest, his hawk killing the bird, Sir Francis refuses to accept the outcome and calls for the other friends to judge the match for, he claims, “My hawk killed too” (3.11). What might otherwise have remained a sporting disagreement, to be settled through cooperative arbitration about who has seen what, erupts into violence and accusations of cheating, leading to Sir Charles slaying two of Sir Francis’s men and the impetus for the play’s subplot, which follows Sir Charles’s attempts to suture his broken friendship with Sir Francis. Worth note is that, as in the later card game, Wendoll is at the center of the cheating. With a monetary wager and perhaps the promise of friendship with Sir Francis’s new brother-in-law Frankford riding on Sir Francis victory, Wendoll vigorously defends Sir Francis’s side, escalating the debate from “words to blows” (4.47). Insofar as Wendoll will later tell Frankford that Sir Francis, in fact, had lost the bet—“your wife’s brother, had the worst, / And lost the wager” (4.41–42)—his arguments during the match on behalf of Sir Francis can be read in retrospect as cheating. And they are enough to spur Sir Francis forward, for, picking up the momentum from Wendoll’s justification, Sir Francis ups the ante of Wendoll’s accusation of dishonor, accusing Sir Charles’s
hawk of being “a rifler” (3.27), a hawk that doesn’t take its prey cleanly, grasping only feathers instead of sinking its talons into the flesh.73

As in the card game scene, Wendoll doesn’t simply cheat; he exploits the uncertainties of information that are built into the game. As card games thrive on uncertainties about information, so hawking matches thrive on friendly bickering about which side presents the strongest case for victory. Wendoll uses this imprecision to his benefit, violating the game rules to which other players have subscribed. The results work to his benefit, for the story of the fatal duel that results proves well worth the telling. It is no wonder that Wendoll rushes to be the first to inform Frankford about what has happened. As Frankford’s servant Nick reports, “It seems he comes in haste. His horse is booted / Up to the flank in mire, himself all spotted / And stained with plashing. Sure he rid in fear / Or for a wager” (4.20–23). As is so often the case in the play, Nick’s instincts about Wendoll are right, for Wendoll’s risky ride pays off: by arriving at Frankford’s house with the news before anyone else, he manages to endear himself to Frankford and gain financially, not to mention romantically.

It is notable that Wendoll performs his cheating quite openly. Like his performance of melancholic love in his soliloquies, Wendoll’s cheating during the hawking match is no secret to the theater audience, who witness Wendoll arguing for Sir Francis’s hawk during the match but admitting the hawk’s loss later. So, too, in the card game, Wendoll’s cheating is hardly cagey. Instead of arranging the cards in such a way that he would win by a slim margin and remain unsuspected, Wendoll gives himself an impossibly strong hand, thereby announcing his cheating at cards in the same way that he uses obvious sexual double-entendres to declare his affair with Anne, who even comments that Wendoll is “too public” in his demonstration of affection for her (11.93). The theatricality of Wendoll’s cheating turns him, I would suggest, into the play’s most articulate commentator on gaming culture and, by consequence, male friendship. He reminds the audience that cheating is less a violation of the ludic world than an unavoidable feature of it.74 In his public display of cheating, Wendoll resembles the “griefers” of today’s online gaming world, who theatrically break the rules of games and frustrate other players. While some in the gaming world label griefers spoilsports and even terrorists (insofar as their antics can overload servers, shutting down routine gameplay and costing players time and money), many griefers maintain that they are restoring the spirit of play to a gaming world than has come to take itself too seriously.75 Playing by their own rules, griefers underscore the extent to which games, for any player who wishes to win, are often less about following the rules than about figuring out ways to
work around them. Such players are less cheaters than what Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux call “metagamers.” These players encourage a modification of Celia Pearce’s definition of the kinds of information present in a game, for in addition to the information designated by the rules, information can be created and manipulated by participants themselves, who change the rules to fit better their purposes in playing.

Griefers demonstrate that cheating, rather than being understood solely in terms of ethics, has a metacommunicative function: they call attention, by refusing to conform, to the frame of the game. We might recall here anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s formative definition of gameplay as a metacommunicative act. As players meditate on a game’s rules (this is cheating or it isn’t), they enter into a communicative mode that, Bateson argues, is essential to ludic activity. Wendoll’s foul play might be read similarly as a social overture, an attempt to step outside of the card game in order to call attention self-consciously to its epistemological structure and meaning. By performing his cheating openly, Wendoll initiates a metaconversation about gameplay as well as about friendship. In fact, Anne’s flighty question “What’s trumps?” may constitute an effort to interrupt the heated metaconversation taking place here and thereby diffuse the tensions so obviously building between Wendoll and Frankford.

In depicting cheating as an unavoidable feature of card games, Heywood participates in a cultural commonplace. Early modern representations of card play (dramatic and otherwise), though they may rebuke cheats, also compulsively illuminate cheating strategies. Continental paintings depicting card games inevitably dramatize rooking. Caravaggio’s famous Cardsharps (c. 1595) shows the rook pulling a hidden card out of his belt in response to the gestures of his accomplice, who can see the opponent’s cards (Figure 14); a similar move is dramatized in The Cheat with the Ace of Clubs by Georges de la Tour (c. 1630–4; Figure 15). Moral and religious criticisms of playing cards similarly underscore the inevitability of cheating. Richard Rice’s Invective against Vices, Taken for Vertue (1581) condemns card play by maintaining that the honest player is an illusion: “For marke the moste honest gamesters that will professe themselves before they enter into plaie, by their false fidelitie, that they will plaie never a Carde false, nor never an Ace wrong, and when they are once entered into plaie, there shall be packyng of Cardes, winkyng with the eyes, blaryng out the tongue, renouncying the Trompe” and other such typical schemes.

Even the earliest instruction manuals for card play, such as John Cotgrave’s Wits Interpreter (1655) and Charles Cotton’s The Compleat Gamester (1674), move fluidly between descriptions of games and elucidations of
how to cheat at them. Immediately after explaining how, in Ruff games, one “ought to have a special eye to what cards are play’d out” so as to strategize play effectively, Cotton underscores that “[r]eneging or renouncing, that is, not following suit when you have it in your hand, is very fowl play, and he that doth it ought to forfeit one, or the Game upon a Game.” Cheating moves are common enough that they have names—“reneging” or “renouncing”—and predetermined punishments. Cotton moves so briskly between descriptions of games and explanations of how to cheat at them that it is difficult to distinguish where he draws the line between rule breaking and skilled play. For instance, he writes, “He that can by craft over-look his adversaries Game hath a great advantage” and goes on to describe ways partners can communicate “what Honours they have, as by the wink of one eye, or putting one finger on the nose or table.” Does he condemn cheats or describe good strategy here? The inevitability of cheating or the failure to spot it helps explain, perhaps, why the game Ruff developed later in the century into Whist, which initially was supposed to be played in virtual silence, thus ostensibly eliminating one avenue through which players illicitly share information, what we call “table talk.” To be sure, Cotton’s and others’ revelations of cheating are intended to depict the underside of popular recreations, warning innocent players of the dangers that may befall them. But I am interested less in their moralizing function than in their effect. The enactment of a card game seems almost inevitably to raise the specter of cheating, so that the question becomes not whether or even why people cheat, but what sort of role cheating plays and how cheating is to be addressed during a game session.

This shift away from the ethics to the effects of cheating helps us to see that what is notable about Heywood’s card game is less that Wendoll cheats, or even that he cheats so flagrantly, but that Frankford says nothing in response. In fact, Frankford covers up Wendoll’s dishonesty, for were the match to continue, Wendoll’s impossibly good hand would be revealed to all—and Frankford would have no choice but to accuse his friend of dishonorable play. By ending the game prematurely and feigning illness, Frankford prevents Wendoll’s exposure. The cover-up preserves at least the illusion of Frankford’s friendship with Wendoll, avoiding the kind of rupture of male homosocial community that we witness in the falcon wager scene. When Sir Charles accuses Sir Francis of foul play—the latter claims he has won when everyone knows that he hasn’t—the result is tragic. Men die, Sir Charles loses everything, and it takes great sacrifice to suture the broken male bonds. Instead of denouncing Wendoll on the basis of dishonesty during a game, Frankford waits and catches Wendoll out on
the charge of adultery, which affects Frankford’s relationship with Anne far more gravely than his with Wendoll. In fact, as critics have noted, while Anne is harshly punished with public shaming and forgiven only on her deathbed, Wendoll escapes punishment completely. Indeed, he plans to return to England when “these rumours / . . . abate,” expecting to find again his “worth and parts being by some great man praised” (16.130–33). Catching someone committing adultery, as it turns out, is far less disruptive to male bonds than catching someone cheating at games. And the play ends with all the men declaring their friendships for one another and their intentions to live happily ever after.

Frankford’s cover-up constitutes an acceptance, however ambivalent, of cheating as part of the terms of card games and of male friendship. As we have seen, in a game of imperfect information like cards, the prospect of cheating is all the greater because information is hidden; the deceit that can undermine the game is difficult to separate from that which makes the game pleasurable to play. A similar paradox inheres in the humanist view of friendship, I’ve suggested. If the relationship between friends, like that between card players, depends on repeated transactions of knowledge, then a good friend, like a good player, does not necessarily undermine the friendship if he withholds some information, saving it for strategic revelation later. The friendship and the game continue and, in fact, to some extent depend on revelation as an ongoing process in the social transaction. Significantly, revelation can exist only when there is something hidden left to be revealed. To be sure, imbalances can be exploited toward unethical ends, but the simple presence of gaps in knowledge about the other does not necessarily compromise friendship. Wendoll and Frankford both act unethically with each other when they withhold information—Wendoll by cheating and Frankford by allowing the cheating to go unchecked—and this paradoxically sustains their friendship.

WAGERING ON THEATER

In arguing that the enactment of games enables the audiences to Heywood’s and Mr. S.’s plays, not to mention Latimer’s sermons, a way to query early modern male friendship, I follow the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who argues in his influential essay “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” that games can offer a forum for, as well as a meta-social commentary on, the terms of male homosociality in a particular culture. Significantly, Geertz argues that the cultural and social force of a
game comes not only from the dramatized contest (in Bali between two fighting birds, and the men to whom they belong), but from the engagement of the event’s spectators. My focus on the epistemology of audience engagement takes Geertz’s conclusions in a very different direction, though. For Geertz, what audiences gain through the game is “a kind of sentimental education,” and, notably, Geertz turns to an analogy with the Shakespearean theater to make his point:

If, to quote Northrop Frye again, we go to see *Macbeth* to learn what a man feels like after he has gained a kingdom and lost his soul, Balinese go to cockfights to find out what a man, usually composed, aloof, almost obsessively self-absorbed . . . feels like when, attacked . . . and driven in result to the extremes of fury, he has totally triumphed or been brought totally low.”

Spectators of games and of theater are drawn into the emotional plight of others, but they are also, and I’d argue, even more prominently drawn into alternative states of knowing. What Heywood’s play and the performance of *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* at Cambridge suggest is that theatri-going and male friendship work on not only affective but epistemological registers. The drama of a game reveals cultural beliefs about masculinity and homosocial affiliation by externalizing and animating spectators’ emotions, to be sure, but also by inviting audiences to negotiate imperfect information.

Although I have grouped *Gammer* and *A Woman Killed* together because both use card play to meditate on the informational game of friendship and its risks, it is worth noting not only the temporal gap between initial performances of these plays (about fifty years), but, more pertinent to my argument in this book, the differences in their performance venues. Whereas *Gammer* was a university play, staged in an indoor hall primarily as an academic exercise, *A Woman Killed* was first performed publicly in a commercial amphitheater, probably the Rose. Partly at stake in these differences of venue are issues of space and theatrical staging; as I have suggested, *Gammer*’s performance in a space that allowed onstage seating may explain why the play must move its card game offstage to create the same dynamics of imperfect information that *A Woman Killed* accomplishes. But the venues also differ in terms of the level of social intimacy shared by performers and their audiences. *Gammer*’s actors likely had close relationships with some if not all of their audience members, who were fellow students and staff at the university. The social history
Gammer’s audiences shared with the play’s performers arguably helped produce a sense of intimacy, of friendship, between Gammer’s producers and consumers. By contrast, the audiences who first attended A Woman Killed were generally strangers, unknown to the actors and other producers of the play. Having bought their tickets in advance to see professional drama, the audience to A Woman Killed approached their experience at the theater as a commercial transaction.

One way to read the staged game in A Woman Killed, then, is as a reworking and suturing of the social bond between producers and consumers of theater in this commercial context. When, beginning around 1576, theaters demanded payment before the production, they likely fostered an environment of some distrust and anxiety. Theatergoing became a gamble: Would playgoers get out of the experience as much as they had put in? Interestingly, one of the earliest stories about this new system of prepayment centers on cheating. Playgoers who had put their coins in the money box before entering the theater were bamboozled by the show’s producer, who ended up leaving from a side door, locking the audience in the theater and escaping with their money. Although an extreme example of how the commercial theater’s imbalances in information could be exploited, the incident helps explain why playwrights and actors developed numerous strategies for establishing trust. If playgoing was a gamble, then producers of theater had a stake in reminding audiences that gambling was about more than financial profit, that the game could be enjoyed on its own terms, regardless of its outcome. Theater’s producers profited from convincing playgoers that the commercial transaction of theater was not necessarily a cold, imbalanced one, where the audience could be exploited by fraud. Not knowing was part of the pleasure in theater, as it is in all gambling. As A Woman Killed revises a discourse of friendship, presenting it as a game of imperfect information, it offers its audiences a way to think of commercial theater as constituted by a more intimate relationship between producers and consumers, characterized by exchange and sharing, even if also structured by imbalances, secrets, and withholding.

For theater makers, the advantages of this approach are numerous, especially in a vibrant entertainment marketplace such as that of early modern London, where theater competed with many other leisure activities. Such activities were available in taverns and alehouses right next door to the theater, and evidence suggests that patrons may have even brought their favorite sitting pastimes into the theater with them. Farmer Chetham’s commonplace book describes a gallant who “playes at Primero over the stage” possibly while the play was being performed. In a commercial
theater, where the paying customer is always right, there was little to pre-
vent anyone from playing Primero “over the stage” or even on it. If audi-
ences viewed the play as a commodity that had been purchased and could
be used however the consumer wished, then Heywood and his actors may
not have been able to prevent audiences from playing cards during the
show. However, as I’ve been suggesting, they and their fellow producers of
theater tried to convince playgoers that theater could be just as satisfying as
a game of cards, and for many of the same reasons.

Staged card games, as they hyperfocalize on the dynamic of imperfect
information, reveal particularly clearly how theaters used the ethos of
gaming to sell the pleasures of commercial theatergoing. Even if theater
was, to some degree, a power struggle between parties with different kinds
of knowledge and competing spheres of influence, as others have argued,
that competitive ethos could be reframed to present the commercial theater
as a space for cooperative games of imperfect information. Scenes of card
play, I have suggested, manifest particularly elegantly the ludic dimen-
sions of the theater. Spectators who approached theater as playable
media—vicariously participating in the fictional card games onstage—
could more easily get drawn into the psychological and social dramas rep-
resented by the play’s actors, experiencing firsthand the anxieties of imper-
fect information that a character like Frankford is meant to have. At the
same time, these spectators could come to view imperfect information in
the theater, along with concomitant disparities in knowledge among the-
ater’s participants, not solely as uncomfortable realities of a competitive
theatrical economy but as the grounds for establishing a new kind of social
bond, a sort of friendship, with theater’s producers.