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*Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama,*  
1550–1700 (review)

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and their relationship to literary and cultural narratives ensures the valuable contribution made by *Unsettling Partition*.

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Marta Straznicky. *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama, 1550–1700*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 182 pp. \$85.00.

Plays written by women in the early modern period have attracted significant scholarly interest over the last quarter century, and the works of such writers as Mary Sidney, Elizabeth Cary, and Margaret Cavendish are now known to many. Their writing has been considered within biographical, socio-political, and theatrical contexts and, thanks to new editions and anthologies, is now frequently taught in university classes at all levels. The wider circulation of their work has been accompanied by increasing recognition that closet drama is not a poor cousin of publicly staged dramatic entertainment but a genre with its own merits, produced for specific occasions and purposes and with its own set of dramatic conventions. This, Straznicky insists, is the “fundamental argument” of her book. “Closet drama,” she states, “is an *alternative* to the commercial stage, and ... its very difference from the public theatre was mobilized by women writers to engage in a discourse that was, until the Restoration, systemically inaccessible to them” (112). This may not be a particularly new argument, but it certainly benefits from the consideration it receives in *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama, 1550–1700*.

Marta Straznicky readily acknowledges the many contributors who have advanced our understanding of early modern women's closet drama to date, and her thorough research is obvious as she draws on past readings of the plays she discusses. In contrast to many of her predecessors, she examines closet plays both before and after the closure of the public theatres in 1642. While consideration of plays spanning 150 years could have resulted in an excessively weighty tome or vague generalizations, Straznicky succeeds in maintaining a focused argument as she examines the work of Jane Lumley, Elizabeth Cary, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Finch. While the exclusion of certain authors such as Lady Mary Wroth, and the limited references to Mary Sidney Herbert and Katherine Philips have been questioned (Bennett 378), the choice of works allows for a useful

comparison of plays both prior to the interregnum when women did not have access to the public stage and post Restoration when they did.

This text also takes an unusual approach to women's closet drama in other ways. First, the plays are examined within the context of performance traditions, but without privileging the commercial theatre as the standard of comparison. Instead, Straznicky analyzes how the women writers she studies selectively include elements of the theatrical tradition in their closet plays. Second, she considers the plays against a history of reading to argue that these women did not wish to avoid the public eye entirely but that they wanted to control public access to their works. She concludes that the privacy of the closet, "a site of writing, reading, and—potentially—performance" (113), and the more controlled "private" circulation of closet drama permitted an "ideological resistance" (117) that, because it was hidden, may have been even more menacing than that of the public stage.

Straznicky opens her argument by acknowledging the difficulty of defining the concepts of public and private in the early modern period. Questions are raised about the early modern household as a private space and the belief that commercial theatre productions were more or less public than a play in manuscript or print. Straznicky provides detailed analysis of printing and manuscript conventions associated with drama, methods of play circulation that are often granted only fleeting attention, and argues that "manipulations of print and manuscript format enable the woman writer to address a readership that is selectively public or private" (1). She also connects closet drama to plays performed at court and in academic settings and suggests that play reading was considered a pastime of an intellectual elite and that it became increasingly politicized when the theatres closed.

The plays are discussed in chronological order, beginning with Lumley's *Iphigeneia*. Noting prior studies that viewed Lumley's work as a faulty schoolgirl exercise and, more recently, as a political commentary on virgin sacrifice and the execution of Lady Jane Grey, Straznicky returns Lumley's work to the context of humanist education principles while insisting that the choice of text and method of translation suggest "a personal rather than programmatic endeavour" (21). Looking closely at the differences between Euripides' text and Lumley's translation, Straznicky contends that Lumley purposely chose to emphasize the father-daughter relationship between Agamemnon and Iphigeneia and that her changes also reveal careful attention to both sound and dramatic coherence, suggesting that

the play was intended for performance, possibly to be read in front of Elizabeth I during her visit to Nonsuch Palace.

Having focused on the humanist context and performability of *Iphigeneia*, Straznicky moves on to explore the idea of private and public readerships for Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam*. In contrast to criticism that has traditionally connected Cary's work with Senecan tragedy and the mode of political discourse embraced by the Sidneys and their coterie of writers, Straznicky relates Cary's work to the private pastime of reading. She carefully analyzes the play's typographic arrangement, observing that it was particularly designed for readers and claiming that publication of a closet play could be a way of "specifying rather than renouncing its position within the public sphere" (52–53). Straznicky closes this chapter with a perceptive reading of the two printings of the play, one of which includes the dedicatory sonnet "To Dianaes Earthlie Deputesse, and my worthy Sister, Mistris Elizabeth Carye," and suggests that these are directed to different readerships, one an elite public readership and the other a more private circle of friends and family.

While Cary's work is explored in terms of readership, Cavendish's closet plays are examined in relation to the closure of the theatres in 1642 and the accompanying shift from play going to play reading. Straznicky discusses Cavendish's desire for fame and her equal fear of public censure and points to Cavendish's own criticism of the commercial stage to claim that Cavendish intentionally designed her plays to be read aloud rather than performed on stage. Nonetheless, these plays engage with the conventions of both play reading and play going, and Straznicky notes that the repeated representation of performances in Cavendish's closet drama situates her readers, like her plays, simultaneously in the private world of play reading and the imagined social world of play going. Straznicky thereby concludes that in their design and anticipated performance, Cavendish's closet plays envision a space "in which both author and reader, and perhaps especially the author-reader, can be secluded and socially engaged at the same time" (90).

Moving on to the Restoration period and the reopening of the theatres, Straznicky sees the continuation of the genre of closet drama as a sign that it served a function distinct from commercially staged plays. She maintains that it enabled women to engage in a form of public discourse without "violating the fiction that they were appropriately closeted as individuals" (91). Finch's closet plays, *The Triumphs of Love and Innocence* and *Aristomenes*, are then examined in relation to both her refusal to write for the commercial stage and Katherine Philips's carefully orchestrated

production of her translation of Corneille's *Pompey* on the Dublin stage. Straznicky argues that while the two women use different strategies, they both reject the role of professional playwright because of the "sexualized and commercialized" (97) relationship between playwright and audience in Restoration theatre. She suggests that their emphasis on their status as amateur writers and their resulting anti-professional stance allowed them greater control over the public perception of their work. Straznicky therefore offers a fresh perspective on Finch's work as she concludes that what is often seen as Finch's "retreat from public ... is more accurately a retreat from an indiscriminate public" (109).

Scholars of early modern women's drama will find many familiar references and arguments in *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama, 1550–1700*, but Straznicky goes beyond the familiar to offer provocative readings of the works she discusses. Reassessment of private and public spheres and consideration of reading practices have been the centre of recent scholarly attention; nonetheless, this text is singularly successful in situating specific texts in relation to a history of page and stage, of private reading practices and public theatre performances. Occasionally the discussion seems unnecessarily convoluted—particularly in the conclusion, where Straznicky connects ideas about the space of the closet and the works produced in it. However, the argument regarding closet drama as a viable genre distinct from commercially staged plays remains clear. While the title, *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama, 1550–1700*, implies an overly ambitious project, this slim volume offers a thoroughly researched and engaging analysis of a selection of women's closet plays and their relationship to commercial theatre, print culture, and the space within which these women worked.

## Works Cited

Bennett, Alexandra G. Review of *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama, 1550–1700*, by Marta Straznicky. *Notes and Queries* 53.3 (September 2006): 377–78.

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