Marta Straznicky. *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama, 1550–1700*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xii, 182.

Marta Straznicky's *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama, 1550–1700* is an important study of women's writing in general and of closet drama in particular. It will be important, too, to historians of early modern printed stage plays and of reading practices in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain. Elegant in concept and execution, *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama* demonstrates that even while (perhaps because) women's and men's social roles differed in many ways in the years between 1550 and 1700, any literary history that ignores early modern women's closet drama is incomplete.

In her introductory chapter—indeed throughout the book—Straznicky challenges the idea that there is a radical difference between reading early modern closet dramas and reading plays written for performance on so-called “private” or “public” stages. As closet dramas were published in manuscript or print, familiar “textual cues” such as *dramatis personae* and stage directions invited readers to imagine them in performance. So, too, texts of early modern stage plays were printed for readers who, even if they had never seen them performed, could, with the aid of similar signals in the printed books, experience those plays in their minds’ eyes.

As Straznicky also shows, in the early modern period, “writers who [were] either unwilling or unable to speak in a ‘public’ voice [could] emphasize or exploit the exclusivity of closet drama to restrict their intended readership while at the same time addressing a broad literary and political culture. Webster and Jonson did so by choice; their female counterparts by necessity.” She presents Jane Lumley's *Iphigenia* as the work of a highly educated woman who (unlike translators such as Margaret Roper and Anne Cooke) chooses “an entirely secular theme ... [and] manuscript rather than print circulation” for a play best understood “in the tradition of private household entertainment” within a social system that “identif[ies] nobility with pleasure and privacy.”

Her discussion of *Mariam* describes Elizabeth Cary's play as printed for “a select and educated readership”—the same people who read Senecan dramas such as Mary Sidney's *Antonius*, Samuel Daniel's *Cleopatra*, and Thomas Kyd's *Cornelia*.

With a detailed examination of the printed text of *Mariam*, Straznicky argues that as with plays by Daniel, Marston, and Webster, the stationers who printed *Mariam* carefully packaged it as a “literary” text. Its two issues were targeted “to an educated public of play readers” and to “a domestic literary circle.” One of many effects of this argument is the revelation that *Mariam* was in its own time anything but a marginal text by a woman whose gender made “real” participation in literary culture impossible.

In sharp contrast to Lumley's manuscript and Cary's printed book are the two volumes of Margaret Cavendish's plays that “deliberately put the author's privacy into public circulation.” Seeking a large and diverse audience, Cavendish is here seen as inheriting a system developed in the Civil War years, when plays were (generally) not performed, but printed. Appreciating Cavendish's very real skill, Straznicky

characterizes her as “deliberate and knowing” in “the care she takes to explain the transmission of her text.” Print, Professor Straznicky cannily says, is for Cavendish and her contemporaries “less public, or public in a less damaging way, than performance.” Even the bold Duchess of Newcastle was acutely aware of the ambivalent status of a woman dramatist, but she found in print an arena in which “the author and reader, and perhaps especially the author-reader, can be secluded and socially engaged at the same time.”

As she then discusses Anne Finch, Straznicky continues her argument that early modern closet drama performed an important “cultural function” as it “enable[d] women to participate in various forms of public discourse ... without in fact violating the fiction that they were appropriately closeted as individuals.” In considering why Finch expressly forbade productions of her *Triumph of Love and Innocence* and *Aristomenes*, Straznicky correctly notes that the Restoration “so thoroughly sexualized and commercialized the relationship between playwright and audience that a woman of Finch’s rank, who wanted to preserve her status as an amateur writer, simply could not avoid the stigma that performance entailed.”

Inserted within this chapter is the story of the production and printing of Katherine Philips’s *Pompey* (a translation of Pierre Corneille’s *La Mort de Pompée*). Professor Straznicky ably shows that Philips’s “non-corporeal and non-relational author position” was a “anti-professional stance” designed to save her from criticism as an inept woman writer. Finch, as Professor Straznicky also notes, became an active member of London literary circles, and writings by her—including *Aristomenes*—were printed in the early decades of the eighteenth century. But that neither of Finch’s plays was performed in her lifetime or soon thereafter allows the suggestion that “the fiction of a ‘private’ amateurism which enabled Finch and other aristocratic women writers to have a public literary career extended well beyond her own time.”

Informed by a wide and deep knowledge of early modern literary texts and of both manuscript and printing practices of the period, *Privacy, Playreading, and Women’s Closet Drama* successfully provides ways of seeing Lumley, Cary, Cavendish, Philips, and Finch as similarly influenced by their cultures’ ideas about womanly skill and behavior and also as differently active as dramatists within rather different socio-economic circumstances and over a period of some fifteen decades. A ground-breaking book, this is one many readers of *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* will want in their private libraries and also on the shelves of the libraries of schools in which they teach.

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