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Women's Household Drama: Love's Victorie, A Pastorall, and The concealed Fansyes

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Wroth, Mary, Jane Cavendish, and Elizabeth Brackley.

***Women's Household Drama: Love's Victorie, A Pastorall, and The concealed Fansyes.* Ed. Marta Straznicky and Sara Mueller.**

The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series 66 / Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies Series 544. Toronto: Iter Press / Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2018. Pp. xvi, 273 + 11 ill. ISBN 978-0-86698-602-1 (paperback) US\$49.95.

This volume presents scholarly, annotated editions of three manuscript plays written in specific household contexts by early modern women writers: Mary Wroth's *Love's Victorie* (based on the Huntington manuscript and edited by Marta Straznicky), and Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley's *A Pastorall* and *The concealed Fansyes* (both edited by Sara Mueller). Foregrounding the early modern household as a uniquely productive setting for the literary and theatrical activities of women, the editors explicitly intend the volume to foster and facilitate appreciation for women's household drama, in terms of both its theatrical and literary merits and its materializing a rich site of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English dramatic culture situated elsewhere, and configured differently, than the professional London stage.

Editorial efforts to highlight both the materiality and the performance potential of these manuscript plays, while admirable in theory, prove challenging in practice, partly because the two are not always mutually compatible. While the editors faithfully reproduce the idiosyncrasies of the manuscripts, maintaining original spelling, punctuation, lineation, abbreviation, and layout, thereby successfully conveying the untidiness and inherent ambiguities of the texts as veritable works-in-progress, these efforts do little to assist readers attempting to imagine the plays in performance. Further, some idiosyncrasies—such as contracted, obscure, and occasionally confused speech prefixes; the lack of a referential *dramatis personae*; abrupt occurrences of new speech prefixes (changes of speaker) in the midst of some passages; and a general paucity of entrances, exits, and other stage directions—challenge readers envisioning performance and might have been fixed or supplied with minimal intervention. Although Straznicky and Mueller's approach of preserving the original features of the handwritten documents is laudable from a scholarly perspective, the results offer readers scant assistance in visualizing performance.

Love's Victorie is a case in point. This particularly monotonous version of Wroth's play, based on the Huntington manuscript, features several indistinct characters in a pastoral setting—employing various rhetorical and formal techniques to expound upon the topic of love (soliloquy, monologue, dialogue, song, lyric, etc.)—but involves very little in the way of dramatic action. Straznicky offers a compelling argument that her source manuscript, whose scribal differentiations from the longer Penshurst manuscript scholars usually attribute to the former's incompleteness, may represent an alternate but equally performable version of the play (perhaps more closely resembling court masque). However, her case is somewhat muted by the Huntington version's lack of a memorable fifth act resolution, which in the Penshurst version contains more action than do the first four acts combined: a *Romeo and Juliet*-styled double suicide, resurrection via *deus ex machina* intervention, multiple marriages, and (thus) a rather satisfying final reference to the titular victory of love. The Huntington manuscript, by contrast, concludes quite abruptly with a dangling speech prefix near the beginning of its fifth act and no resolution to the enforced marriage plot. Nevertheless, Straznicky's contention that the question of completeness is more complex than it may seem at first glance, and that scholars ought to study the Huntington version on its own merits, is validated by her scrupulous edition of Wroth's curiously patchwork manuscript, which was composed at different times in two distinct hands, and may have been intended as a gift copy since it eventually came into the possession of Wroth's friend and neighbour Sir Edward Dering, an avid theatre-goer and playbook collector, whose country house was the site of a flourishing amateur theatrical culture.

The volume's second half is occupied by Mueller's editions of Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley's *A Pastorall* and *The concealed Fansyes*, collaborative plays the sister authors apparently penned (possibly assisted by their younger sibling Frances) while living together as captives in the family home of Welbeck during the English Civil War—a context Mueller deems essential to our understanding of the plays, which both are structured around and allude to the protracted absence from Welbeck of their father, William Cavendish, the Marquis and later duke of Newcastle, a noted theatrical patron and writer who actively encouraged his daughters' literary interests. Also reflecting the benefits of their education and the environment in which they were raised (Margaret Cavendish was their stepmother), the sisters' two plays,

along with over eighty short poems, are collected in two extant manuscripts, one located in the Bodleian and the other in the Beinecke, both apparently penned in the hand of John Rolleston, their father's secretary, likely during different periods. Noting that there are few substantive variants between the plays but significant differences between the manuscripts (the former has the qualities of a presentation volume and presents authorship as collaborative, while the latter is less formal, possibly incomplete, altogether lacks *The concealed Fansyes*, and sometimes presents Jane as author and Elizabeth as reader), Mueller conjectures that the copy texts Rolleston used may have been transcribed by different people, and that the Beinecke may represent an earlier version of Cavendish and Brackley's work. Clearly designed to be read, the manuscript plays also gesture toward the desire for, if not the possibility of, performance: *A Pastorall* structurally mimics masque and is set outdoors, while *The concealed Fansyes* is patterned on Ben Jonson's humoral comedies, and contains several stage directions, including one rather elaborate special effect.

Though the sisters' circumstances during the war, including their father's absence, likely prevented performance of either play during the seventeenth century, both have enjoyed recent nonprofessional productions. This volume, which admittedly lends itself to scholarship more readily than to performance, carefully preserves both Wroth's and also Cavendish and Brackley's manuscript plays, presenting them as crucial documents attesting to the oft-overlooked importance of the early modern household as a vital site of literary and dramatic production that afforded women considerable agency as writers, readers, performers, audiences, editors, compilers, and collectors. Straznicki and Mueller thereby ensure the accessibility of these manuscript plays, while encouraging continued study into what the materials of women's household drama might still have to teach us about early modern literary and dramatic culture.

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