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## Margaret Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy* and The White Bear Theatre

Directed by Graham Watts  
The White Bear Theatre, London, UK  
Performance Dates: July 3-21, 2018

Reviewed by LARA DODDS

The performance of Margaret Cavendish's play, *The Unnatural Tragedy* at the White Bear Theatre during July 2018 was its first professional performance in the over three hundred years since its publication. As director Graham Watts wrote in the program notes, "Nothing has been added or adapted. The structure of the piece with its short scenes and juxtaposed situations, the modern language and contemporary content, were all penned by her 360 years ago." But if the script was remarkably faithful to Cavendish's original, the performance was equally fresh and modern. While the title and main plots of the play are tragic, the lively young cast brought out the humor and contemporary relevance of Cavendish's text in a way that makes a compelling argument for further performances of her dramatic oeuvre.

*The Unnatural Tragedy* is one of two tragic plays in *Playes* (1662), Cavendish's first published volume of dramatic texts. In the copious prefatory material to this volume, Cavendish explains that she has constructed her dramatic works based on principles of verisimilitude. She explains that she does not structure her plays based on the so-called dramatic unity favored by Ben Jonson because such construction is "neither Usual, Probable, nor Natural." Instead, she claims her plays are

like the Natural course of all things in the World, as some dye sooner, some live longer, and some are newly born, when some are newly dead, and not all continue to the last day of Judgment; so my Scenes, some last longer than othersome [*sic*], and some are ended when others are begun; likewise some of my Scenes have no acquaintance or relation to the rest of the Scenes, although in one and the same Play, which is the reason many of my Playes will not end as other Playes do.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, *The Unnatural Tragedy*, like most of the plays in the 1662 volume, includes multiple plots connected by theme rather than by character or action. *The Unnatural Tragedy* includes two tragic plots of about equal length, each of which is "unnatural" in its own way. In the first, Monsieur Malateste abuses his virtuous wife Madame Bonit—ignoring and insulting her, sleeping with her maid, stealing her land—until she is driven to an early death. Malateste quickly remarries a

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beautiful young virgin, and, in a satisfying reversal, suffers when his young wife takes command of the household. In the second plot, drawn loosely from John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633), a young man (Frere) returns home from several years abroad and is struck by his sister's (Soeur) beauty. Though Soeur is recently and happily married, Frere pursues her relentlessly, rapes her, and then commits murder-suicide. These two plots are interspersed with the comic subplot of the Sociable Virgins, a group of young women who function, as I have argued elsewhere, as a Chorus, providing a meta-dramatic commentary on the play's themes: nature, women's constraints and opportunities in patriarchy, marriage and its discontents.<sup>2</sup>

It was once common for critics of Cavendish's drama to describe it as not only unperformed, but unperformable. This production definitively disproves such claims. Graham Watts, who is an experienced director of Shakespeare and early modern drama, turns the supposed disadvantages of Cavendish's dramatic writing—the unconnected plots, short scenes, and apparent digressions—to his advantage. The play was performed in a small, black box theater with no scene changes and few props. The play's action was set in the present day, and the characters were costumed simply and legibly for a contemporary British audience: the Sociable Virgins wore school uniforms, Frere the clothing of a hipster tourist, and Monsieur Malateste that of an aging man holding on to his youth. In a brief, wordless scene added to the text, Soeur and Lady Amour, Frere's more appropriate love interest, wear identical dresses, subtly enhancing the incest theme. Cavendish's short scenes were played at a fast pace, with frequent entrances and exits, which highlighted the thematic integrity of the play. While characters from the different plots rarely interacted, the quick shifts between them highlighted the parallels between the plots. The performance had a small cast, and strategic double casting further emphasized the play's social critique. For instance, the actor who played Madame Bonit also played the servant who memorializes Bonit after her death, giving a voice to a critique of patriarchy that Bonit herself could not speak.

The Sociable Virgins, a group of young women who “meet every day to discourse and talk, to examine, censure, and judge of every body, and of every thing” were a great strength of the performance.<sup>3</sup> Many of these talented young actors were making their professional debut, and the chemistry among the Sociable Virgins was strong. Their wit and humor carried the first half of the play, keeping the audience engaged as the other plots were being established. The decision to cast the Sociable Virgins as schoolgirls was a good one. It gave motivation to some of their more abstruse conversation by casting their discussion of literature, history, and science as a response to their lessons, but, more importantly, it also crystallized the play's central concern with patriarchy and the compromises it imposes. We expect teenagers to challenge authority and question the rules of the world they live in, and the Sociable Virgins do this well. Many of their scenes are with the Matron, here their teacher, and they are often in conflict with the authority that she represents. The Matron's authority comes from her adherence to a traditional, and limited, idea of womanhood. The Virgins challenge these restrictions—“if women were employ'd in the Affairs of State, the World would live more happily”—and the Matron reinforces them: “'Tis strange, Ladies, to hear

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you talk without knowledge, neither is it fit for such young Ladies as you are to talk of State-matters. . . your Discourses should be of Masks, Plays, and Balls, and such like Recreation, fit for your Youth and Beauty.”<sup>4</sup> But if adolescence is a time to challenge authority, it can also be a time of choices that shape one’s adulthood, choices, which for women, are often tied up with marriage. This is the narrative arc that Cavendish gives to the Sociable Virgins: one of them detects the opportunity for personal advantage in Monsieur Malateste’s widowhood, and she marries him. After a celebratory wedding scene, the Sociable Virgins are largely absent from the second half of the play, and their absence is sharply felt. Replaced on the stage by the one of their number who “made good” through marriage, the absence of the Virgins emphasizes the high cost of this version of adulthood for girls. After her marriage to Monsieur Malateste, this former Virgin—now Madam Malateste, gleefully inhabits a negative stereotype of femininity, suggesting that marriage is not a route to happiness, but instead a compromise that women make in order to gain power and authority in a flawed system.

The absence of the Sociable Virgins from the final two acts of the play also corresponds to the play’s shift from a comic to a tragic mode. Frere is clearly the villain of this play, and the performance is all the more chilling in that he does not seem to realize that he is. Frere represents his love for his sister as authentic, sincere, and irresistible, and he does not halt his pursuit even in the face of Soeur’s clear and unequivocal rejection. This plot has an unfortunate contemporary relevance; Frere’s violent sense of entitlement to his sister, his absolute disregard for her consent, recalls the toxic mixture of violence, entitlement, and misogyny in the several recent attacks against women by so-called involuntary celibates, or incels. In one of the few major changes to Cavendish’s text, this performance attempted to reinvest Soeur with the agency her brother had stolen from her by changing his murder of her to a suicide. While I understand the motivation behind this change, particularly for the young actors who performed these difficult roles so well, I think it was a misstep that inadvertently participates in the victim-blaming that too often accompanies the representation of sexual violence.

This production of *The Unnatural Tragedy* should be a harbinger of further professional performances of Cavendish’s plays, including performances of the more experimental works published in her first volume of drama, *Playes* (1662). Under Graham Watts’s able direction, this company demonstrated that Cavendish wrote drama that is funny, moving, and relevant to contemporary concerns. This performance benefited from a staging informed by the conventions of early modern performance, but it offers a perspective rarely found in the current repertory of early modern drama, which is largely dominated by Shakespeare’s works. As Watts writes in his program notes, “9 of the cast of 13 are women and 70% of the dialogue is spoken by female voices.” Along with the multiple, thematically-linked plots, this focus on female voices is one of the most distinctive elements of all of Cavendish’s plays as a whole. In this Cavendish anticipated Hollywood’s belated female-led blockbusters such as *Ghostbusters* (2017) or *Ocean’s 8* (2018) by more than 300 years. Perhaps the success of *The Unnatural Tragedy* will lead future directors to try out *Loves Adventures* instead of yet another production of *Twelfth Night* or *Bell in Campo* instead of *Henry V*.

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### Notes

1. Margaret Cavendish, *Playes* (1662), A4r.
2. Lara Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 159-90.
3. Cavendish, *Playes*, 328.
4. *Ibid.*, 332-3.

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