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# Imaginary Transparency: Some Reflections on the Editing of Early Modern Women's Drama

CLARE R. KINNEY

An editor close reads so that others may close read in their turn. I am not thinking here of the more technical work of the textual editor; my focus is rather upon the scholar who glosses and annotates at the level of the word, the line, or the sentence, with an eye to the student reader. Part of his or her task involves deciding just how much information to offer—how to clarify difficult syntax, archaic usage, unfamiliar words or allusions without absolutely preempting the novice reader's own acts of interpretation. These decisions, to be sure, will be informed by the editor's own critical orientation to the text—in particular, by his or her sense of what should drive its parsing, what is most important in its wordhoard.

The explosion of scholarship on early modern women's lyric and drama from the early 1980's onward occurred after the displacement of primarily formalist approaches to literary texts by alternative methodologies (most notably gender studies, psychoanalytic criticism, New Historicism, and cultural materialism). As a result, the work of these authors did not enjoy those prefatory decades of close reading that the canonical male authors had received—the critical labor that worried away at stylistic challenges, textual ambiguity, and interpretive cruxes (producing, for example, article upon article analyzing tricky poems like Shakespeare's sonnet 94).<sup>1</sup> This essay explores some of the consequences of this particular historical circumstance for editorial projects addressing women dramatists. If scholarly editors turn away from acknowledging and lingering over local difficulties, eccentricities, and surprises, their minimal glosses mask the presence of stylistic and semantic complexity in previously unedited works; the reader is left confronting what I term “imaginary transparency.”

The understandable enthusiasm for bringing previously occluded works to a wider audience has not consistently resulted in what Kent Cartwright happily calls “the intimate, nuanced experience of the artifact.”<sup>2</sup> To put it another way, the “rediscovery” of women's writing has not always been driven by a sustained focus upon matters of style and diction. (It is possible that this was a consequence, in the earlier days of critical investigations of early modern women writers in all genres, of accusations that the works in question were not as artistically accomplished as those of canonical male authors; scholars in the field often sidestepped the “aesthetic value” debate, shifting their emphases elsewhere.)<sup>3</sup>

## Close Reading

Critical introductions have focused (and still focus) upon larger thematic or biographical concerns and upon the particular and fraught situation of the woman writer who worked within (or refashioned) genres and modes previously considered the domain of men. These matters are indisputably crucial to our understanding of these texts. In introducing a work to new audiences, however, an editor might also choose to consider sense-making at all levels and be prepared to unfold linguistic meanings which are not immediately obvious—or which are shaped by idiosyncrasies of form or style at a “micro” level.

In order for this to occur, the editor must herself deploy particularly sophisticated close reading skills as she anticipates the challenges that less experienced readers may face in parsing the text under consideration. But recent editions of early modern women writers tend to privilege what one might term middle distance reading, often offering suggestive larger contexts for interpretation at the expense of local illumination. This can occur with regard to form as well as to content. Consider, for example, Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam The Fair Queen of Jewry* (published 1613). As the only original play authored by a woman and circulated in print during the period, it has received a good deal of critical attention and has already appeared in at least seven modern editions.<sup>4</sup> A student approaching Cary’s drama after some exposure to Shakespearean drama might immediately be struck by the fact that she does not write in blank verse. She employs the rhymed quatrains with a good deal of end-stopping used by some (although by no means all) contemporary authors of closet drama: quatrains which lend themselves to sententious utterance.<sup>5</sup> However, she quite frequently terminates a series of three quatrains with a rhymed couplet—a couplet that does not necessarily mark the end of an extended speech. Cary embeds sonnets within her drama.<sup>6</sup>

The play, indeed, opens upon a sonnet. Its heroine, exploring her divided feelings after receiving word that her tyrannical husband Herod has been put to death in Rome, initiates a very long meditation with the following fourteen lines:

How oft have I with public voice run on  
To censure Rome’s last hero for deceit  
Because he wept when Pompey’s life was gone,  
Yet when he lived, he thought his name too great?  
But now I do recant, and, Roman lord,  
Excuse too rash a judgement in a woman.  
My sex pleads pardon; pardon then afford;  
Mistaking is with us but too too common.  
Now do I find, by self-experience taught,  
One object yields both grief and joy:  
You wept indeed, when on his worth you thought,  
But joyed that slaughter did your foe destroy.  
So at his death, your eyes true drops did rain,  
Whom, dead, you did not wish alive again. (l.i.1-14)<sup>7</sup>

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Given Cary's thought-provoking and revisionary appropriation of both Shakespearean form and Petrarchan oxymoron ("One object yields both grief and joy") to explore Mariam's interiority in a play particularly interested in both the "legibility" of women and their public speech, a note drawing the novice reader's attention to Cary's formal choices might be useful. (Can one imagine a modern edition of *Romeo and Juliet* that did not flag the protagonists' shared sonnet at their first encounter?) In six of the seven modern editions I have consulted, however, this opening sonnet is unmarked and only two of those editions even refer to Cary's deployment of sonnets in their introductory matter.<sup>8</sup> In these various mediations of *The Tragedy of Mariam*, the reader is not encouraged to ponder the possibility that poetic form can itself contribute to a text's meanings.

The only anthology of early modern women's drama currently available for classroom use is *Renaissance Drama by Women: Texts and Documents*, edited by S.P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies (first published in 1996 and still in print). It is an admirable volume in many ways—not least because some of the works it includes are not available in any affordable modern edition (e.g. Mary Sidney Herbert's translation of Garnier's *Antoine* as *The Tragedy of Antonie*) or indeed in any modern edition at all (e.g. Elizabeth Brackley and Jane Cavendish's *The Concealed Fancies*). The editors are quite clear about the nature of their intended audience, declaring that while some of the works have been published previously in scholarly editions, "most [of these editions] are inappropriate for classroom use, lacking the necessary notes and textual apparatus to render them accessible to undergraduate students."<sup>9</sup>

Let's glance at some of the "necessary notes" offered for *The Concealed Fancies*. This intriguing play, surviving only in manuscript, was written circa 1645 by two young women of the Cavendish family, apparently for domestic performance, while their family home was under siege by the Parliamentary forces.<sup>10</sup> The drama mixes verse and prose; the prose is witty, supple, allusive and strikingly anticipates the manner of Restoration comedy. The verse is, to put it kindly, labored and its syntax tends to be at once elliptical and muddy.<sup>11</sup> Take, for example, the play's prologue (in fact the first prologue of three):

Ladies, I beseech you blush not to see  
That I speak a prologue, being a she;  
For it becomes as well if votes cry, aye,  
Why then should I, a petticoat, cry, fie!  
Gentlemen, if you so allow, is wit,  
Why then not speak, I pray your patience, sit;  
And now to tell you truth of our new play:  
It doth become a woman's wit the very way;  
And I did tell the poet plainly truth,  
It looks like eighteen or twenty-two youth,  
Or else it would not be, as 'tis but well;  
I'll say no more until your hand-plays tell.  
(“A Prologue on the Stage”: 1-12)

## Close Reading

This is a tricky speech to parse and the edition only offers a little help. (Both spelling and punctuation have been modernized by the editors and comprehension is not helped by the odd positioning of a comma after “cry” rather than “well” in line 3.) A note on “truth” reads “By associating women with ‘truth,’ the authors reverse the ‘women as deceivers’ commonplace.”<sup>12</sup> (Line 2 obviously suggests a female speaker, although interestingly the Cavendish/Brackley text only specifies that its *second* prologue be “spoken by a woman.”) A note on “hand-plays” glosses the phrase as “applause.”<sup>13</sup> Otherwise, meaning and syntax are left to the reader’s own resources, as if they were relatively transparent—and I cannot imagine even a gifted twenty-first century undergraduate reader finding the speech easy to comprehend. A full paraphrase of lines 1-11 might read: “Ladies, I beg you not to blush to see me, a female, speaking a prologue; it’s as acceptable as if a vote had been taken and ‘yes’ was the result [or: it’s acceptable to do it because we had a vote and the result was ‘yes’]; so, in that case, why should I, as a woman, denounce the idea? Gentlemen, if you think what I just said is wit, why should I not speak? So, I pray your patience: sit. Now, to tell you the truth about our new play, it is appropriate to a woman’s wit to do so [i.e. to do the telling]. (Alternatively: it is appropriate that the wit of a woman should explain the truth of the play because it is women’s wit that informs the play.) I told the poet [i.e. the author] the plain truth, it looks like the work of 18 or 22-year-olds [i.e. we’re not just ladies, but we’re young ladies], otherwise it wouldn’t be what it is [i.e. the product of the wit of young ladies]; and that’s just as it should be [or perhaps alternatively, or else it would not be as well as it is].” (We end with a mixture of “lower your expectations, because we’re ladies and we’re young” and a kind of cheerful assertiveness: “it’s right that we young ladies get to offer our own witty work.”) But one needs to work quite hard to produce this reading (which indeed looks more like a garden of forking paths and is certainly open to correction): the text does not, for example, tell us clearly *what* “is wit” in line 5, *whose* “votes” are at issue in line 3, and I found myself further revising the editorial punctuation in the process of paraphrasing.

It’s surprising that the editors, officially intent on making things accessible to inexperienced readers, did not offer more help with the syntax here—or at least concede that the passage is a difficult one to parse. It is odd, furthermore, that they do not offer a gloss on “wit” to suggest its rather specific seventeenth-century connotations of linguistic virtuosity and refined intelligence. (Such a gloss does appear later, at I.ii.7, but only after the word has already been deployed more than once in the text.)<sup>14</sup> The omission is all the more surprising if one invokes a larger historical context. When, in 1651, Anna Weamys publishes her *Continuation to Sir Philip Sidney’s Arcadia*, a lively dedicatory poem by one F. Vaughan printed in the volume’s prefatory matter offers a rather more elegant variation on the notion that the “speaking” of wit is not only a masculine prerogative; its opening lines read:

Lay by your Needles Ladies, take the Pen,  
The onely difference ’twixt you and Men.  
’Tis Tyrannie to keep your Sex in aw,  
And make wit suffer by a Salick Law.

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Good Wine does need no Bush, pure Wit no Beard;  
Since all Souls equal are, let all be heard.<sup>15</sup>

Closer to home, we have an exchange between the plays' heroines, Tattiney and Luceny (who seem to be thinly veiled versions of Cavendish and Brackley, the 18 and 22 year old authors) in the play's second act. Discussing their suitors, Tattiney says, "Do you not wonder that Courtley and Presumption are held wits? For methinks there are no such miracles in their language." Luceny replies: "Why, that's because we have been brought up in the creation of good languages, which will make us ever ourselves." (II. iii. 139-144). Luceny's response is not glossed; again, it is treated as if it were transparent. Yet her words give me pause. What does it mean to have been "brought up in the creation of good languages"—which is offered as an explanation for the ladies' ability to make a finer judgment than the larger world upon the "wit" of their suitors? It seems to suggest an education in not only the proper deployment of words but also in something more akin to the arts of invention—arts here teasingly associated with the enactment of a more authentic sense of self. Or perhaps, given that the ladies spend a good deal of the earlier part of the play critiquing the linguistic posturings of their would-be husbands, they are "ever themselves" in deploying their own language skills to deflate verbal pretension wittily: true wits exploding the "miracles" of false wit. Luceny's meaning seems deeply connected to questions raised by the prologue's defense of women's wit—and indeed *The Concealed Fancies* might itself be imagined by its authors as the product of "good languages." To add a little commentary upon Luceny's speech would at the very least suggest that something rather central to the agendas of the dramatic project deserves more attention here.

Let us consider another passage from Cavendish and Brackley's drama (this exchange is taken from one of its final scenes):

*Enter LUCENY and her [maid, who carries a mirror; looking in the mirror, LUCENY loosens her hair and] sings.*<sup>16</sup>

LUCENY        What is't they say, must I a wife become?  
MAID            Yes, madam, that's the vote, as I do hear it run.  
LUCENY        Why then a wife in show appear,  
                  Though monkey I should dare;  
                  And so upon the marriage day  
                  I'll look as if obey.

*Enter [ELDER] STELLOW, singing.*

Now do I hear the ladies, what wagers they will lay,  
Saying surely you'll disallow obey;  
Truly I know not what you mean, cry you and look away,  
What act you mean to be the scene, lost wagers each must pay.

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LUCENY        Now do I view myself by all so looked upon,  
                  And thus men whispering say, faith she's already gone,  
                  For wit or mirth I plainly see,  
                  That she a wife will be,  
                  No sir, say I, a whit above  
                  Is Hymen's monkey love.

(V.vi.1-17)

The exchange I have reproduced takes place when our two witty heroines have consented to marriage after the return of their absent father. Luceny seems to be loosening her hair for the ceremony in which she'll appear as a virgin for the last time. It offers another passage of strained verse and compressed syntax and another instance of rather minimal (or at least highly selective) annotation. Luceny's opening remarks and the ensuing dialogue between the lady and her brother (Stellow) reprise a question that pervades the play: can love and marriage be reconciled in a culture that officially demands wifely obedience? And will Luceny indeed "dwindle"—to quote Congreve's Millamant—into a dutiful wife?

I reproduce here the notes to this passage offered by the editors:

Line 2	vote = consensus
Line 4	monkey = To be a mimic
Line 4	dare = risk
Line 11	What act you mean to be the scene = whatever form of behaviour (act or scene) you mean to adopt
Line 14	wit = Intellect, see above note to II.i.2
Line 16	whit = a small amount; a pun on whit/wit
Line 17	Hymen, the god of marriage in classical mythology <sup>17</sup>

I find the gloss on "monkey" at line 4 of particular interest. The editorial reading offered here (taking the word as a verb) would suggest we must parse Luceny's words in 3-4 as "I'll appear a wife in show although I should risk being a mimic"; such a reading is complicated, however, by Luceny's later assertion, reintroducing the word in question, that she will not be an obedient wife who has lost her wit and mirth (I would contest in this instance the editorial comma after "gone" in line 13). One might paraphrase her last two lines as "no, sir, I say something just a little above a wife (or something more witty than a mere wife) is Hymen's monkey love." But how do we gloss the final phrase?—the editors offer no help beyond supplying Hymen's identity. Is the thing that is just a little above a wife, or wittier than a wife, Love, which is Hymen's playful pet? (Hymen's monkey, Love.) Or does monkey qualify love: Hymen's antic, roguish love, the monkey that even marriage won't subdue?

Given that close reading is as much about remembering as about reading in isolation, it is tempting to revisit a remark made earlier in the play by the lovelorn suitor Courtley when he is asked "For wife what mistress you would

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woo?” He replies, “My mistress truly I would have / A pretty monkey, yet not grave” and goes on to propose that “I would not have her think of wife / Nor me as husband to make strife, / But justly have her fraught with wit.” (I.i.57-59; 68-70). One could suggest a gloss that invited the reader to glance back at this passage. The authors’ imagination of a man who imagines a wife who is also a witty pretty monkey seems to inform the words they later give to Luceny. Taking another look at “Though monkey I should dare,” I will note that in the play’s manuscript “monkey” [or rather “Munkey”] is capitalized.<sup>18</sup> Old-style capitalization is used for nouns, not verbs—we might therefore consider a reading of lines 3-4 in which Luceny doesn’t propose mimicking wifely obedience but rather will dare still to be a monkey—a roguish lover—which would conform more closely with her conclusion at lines 15-16. (I’d also suggest that if Cavendish and Brackley wished to deploy a verb connoting mimicry in the context of line 4, the more probable choice would be “ape.”)<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, our editors’ annotations do not disclose particularly attentive close reading; more importantly, they do not encourage particularly close reading. Their notes to the passage sidestep, furthermore, a potential gloss which might underline and illuminate the thrust of the encounter. There is no commentary upon the brother’s gleeful declaration that although “the ladies” (presumably the ladies of courtly society) are wagering that Luceny will “disallow obey,” they’ll have to pay up (however Luceny proposes to behave). One might repunctuate “you’ll disallow obey” as “you’ll disallow ‘obey’” and point to the echo of the words of the marriage ceremony in the Book of Common Prayer in which the wife promises to obey, serve, love and honor. Such a gloss would sharpen the tensions between the qualifications Luceny is making in this scene and her brother’s cheerful certainty that she’ll speak the words that society (and religious authority) require of her; it might also encourage a larger reading in which the student might remember a much earlier contestation of conventional gender politics. In II.iii, the ladies ponder power relations in marriage and Tattiney asks Luceny whether Courtley will be her “governor” when she is married. Luceny replies “How often, sister, have you read the Bible over, and have forgotten man and wife should draw equally in a yoke.” (II.iii. 34-38).<sup>20</sup> The matter of obedience has been reprised in the voice of Stellow, the complacent male commentator—but we have already seen the ladies monkeying around (as it were) with alternative textual prescriptions of their behavior and Luceny in V. vi still clings to a vision of love and marriage that remains a w(h)it above the norm. These concerns are revisited in the concluding scene of the play which—most unusually for an early modern comedy—reaches beyond the consummation of the wedding vows. An Epilogue presents us with the heroines discussing their married life and making it quite clear that they have not turned into submissive spouses. Tattiney declares “[T]his you may see is an equal marriage, and I hate those people that will not understand matrimony is to join lovers” (Epilogue 85-87).

My criticism of the annotative practices in what is certainly in many ways an admirable enterprise may seem curmudgeonly, but the stakes are quite high when we consider that Cerasano and Wynne-Davies’s anthology offers us our only modern edition of *The Concealed Fancies*. My particular quarrels with their editorial

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choices are ultimately intended to illuminate a much larger issue: what happens when a new mediation of a previously unedited play ignores or erases local difficulty or complexity; what are the consequences (and indeed the gender politics) of modeling a “middle distance” orientation towards an intricate verbal artifact—an orientation that might suggest the reader should not worry about the small stuff? It is my contention, unsurprisingly, that the small stuff is extremely relevant to and inextricable from the big stuff—which is why, of course, close reading matters.

### Notes

1. I have addressed this phenomenon at more length with respect to the poetry of Mary Wroth; see Clare R. Kinney, “Turn and Counter-Turn: Reappraising Mary Wroth’s Poetic Labyrinths,” *Re-Reading Mary Wroth*, ed. Naomi Miller and Katherine Larson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 85-102.

2. Kent Cartwright, “Rhetorical and Performative Close Reading with the example of *Much Ado About Nothing*,” paper presented at seminar on Close Reading, Shakespeare Association of America Conference, New Orleans, March 2016.

3. For an interesting exploration of this issue, see Elizabeth Hanson. “Boredom and Whoredom: Reading Renaissance Women’s Sonnet Sequences.” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 10 (1997): 165-191.

4. There are four stand-alone editions of the play: those of Margaret Ferguson and Barry Waller (University of California Press, 1994); Stephanie J. Wright (Keele University Press, 1996); Karen Britland (Methuen, 2010) and Ramona Wray (Arden, Methuen Early Modern Drama, 2012). Diane Purkiss includes it in her anthology *Renaissance Women: The Plays of Elizabeth Cary and the Poems of Aemilia Lanyer* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1994); S.P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies in their anthology *Renaissance Drama by Women: Texts and Documents* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Clare Carroll pairs the play with an edition of *Othello* (Longman, 2003).

5. Fulke Greville’s *Mustapha* (1609) offers a striking mixture of quatrains, rhymed couplets, and on occasion even blank verse. Samuel Daniel’s *Philotas* (1604) moves very freely between quatrains and extended series of rhymed couplets.

6. For an incisive discussion of Cary’s *Mariam* sonnets, see Ilona Bell, “Private Lyrics in Elizabeth Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam*,” *The Literary Career and Legacy of Elizabeth Cary, 1613–1680*, ed. Heather Wolfe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 17-34.

7. Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam Fair Queen of Jewry*, ed. Ramona Wray (London: Methuen, 2012).

8. The annotative exception is Karen Britland’s edition; Ramona Bray and Britland briefly refer to Cary’s use of sonnets in the introductions to their editions (55 and xiv respectively). Introductory remarks on Cary’s play in Wynne-Davies and Cerasano’s anthology suggest that Cary’s use of quatrains is conventional in closet drama (47) without noting her use of sonnets or recognizing that the quatrain is not an absolute feature of the genre. Indeed Mary Sidney’s translation of Garnier, *The Tragedy of Antonie*—included within the same anthology—is largely written in blank verse, although the Countess of Pembroke often deploys rhymed couplets to close speeches throughout the play (as opposed to using rhyme only at scene endings or act endings).

9. Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, eds. *Renaissance Drama by Women*, x.

10. A transcription of the unique manuscript of *The Concealed Fancies* (Bodleian: Rawlinson MS Poet.16) was made by Nathan Comfort Starr; see “*The Concealed Fancies*: A Play by Lady Jane Cavendish and Lady Elizabeth Brackley,” *PMLA* 46 (1931): 802-838. All citations of the play in this essay are taken from the edition of Cerasano and Wynne-Davies and are noted parenthetically.

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11. Cerasano and Wynne-Davies make no comment upon this divided style in their introductory matter. Nor do they comment upon the fact that the play's characters often deploy a hermetic lexicon that tempts one to think of its authors as seventeenth-century Mitfords.

12. Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, 209, note 2.

13. Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, 209, note 3.

14. See e.g. 1.i.70, as well as the Prologue.

15. Anna Weamys, *A Continuation of Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia*, ed. Patrick Colborn Cullen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 116.

16. The editors modernize the original stage direction, which according to Starr's transcription reads: "Enter Luceny and hir waiteing Woman with hir Glasse. And as Luceny opens hir Haire shee sings This Songe" ("*The Concealed Fancies*," 832).

17. Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, 213, notes 21-27.

18. See Starr, "*The Concealed Fancies*," 833.

19. For a rather different take on the monkey business, see Alison Findlay, "Playing the 'scene self': Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley's 'The Concealed Fancies,'" *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*, ed. Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 154-176.

20. Luceny may be playing a little fast and loose with scripture here; the editorial note takes us to Philippians 4.3, which doesn't seem quite apposite.

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