Printed Voices: Women, Print, and Performance

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Abstract

This thesis suggests the limitations of the term ‘closet drama’ when applied to marginalized playwrights from the early modern and modern periods. Using four case studies, two British playwrights from the early modern period, Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639) and Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), and two Americans from the modern period, Djuna Barnes (1892-1982) and Marita Bonner (1898-1971), I argue that these dramatists used printed play-texts to subvert social restrictions relating to gender, sexuality, class, and race, access new spaces, and reframe and confront traditional narratives. Each of my case studies examines how print served a specific performative and political purpose for individual playwrights in specific socio-historical contexts. My aim is to highlight closet drama’s cultural significance as an alternative method of artistic engagement and encourage canonical acknowledgement of unconventional dramatic work.
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For the parental unit and the sibling
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INTRODUCTION:
WOMEN, PRINT, AND PERFORMANCE

When I was first introduced to women closet dramatists of the early modern period, I remember my surprise. Moreover, I remember being struck by the issues in their writing that echoed, with fascinating similarities, my own contemporary complaints about gender bias. Since my introduction to early modern women closet dramatists, I have learned that there is a wide selection of women dramatists, both modern and early modern, whose work remains mostly unperformed, not only because of gender bias but also because of issues relating to sexuality and race. While never collectively labeled ‘closet drama,’ these plays do not adhere easily to conventional interpretations of theatre and live performance or even to the conventional understanding of ‘closet drama’ when the text, style, and form is examined through non-hegemonic lenses. This thesis examines the social restrictions that prevented cultural engagement by marginalized groups in order to lay the ground work for re-evaluating unperformed play-texts.

Closet Drama

In his book Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama, W.B. Worthen notes that “drama has always been an anomaly in print culture” (5). Closet drama, then, may be described as an anomaly for both print culture and drama, existing as “a play intended for reading rather than performance” (Law 112). Historically, the genre has functioned as a response to and rejection of mainstream theatrical values and traditions. Existing ‘closet drama’ ranges from Seneca’s tragedies to early modern Neo-Senecan plays for private reading; to Protestant and Royalist anti-
theatrical texts during the Civil War, Interregnum, and Restoration; ‘verse’ drama of the Romantic Revival; and, finally, to modernist anti-theatricality of the early twentieth century.

The definition ‘intended for reading,’ however, is misleading. It oversimplifies how the dramatic form in print engages with the performance space. In *Reading the Theatre*, Anne Ubersfeld argues that a play-text’s “relation to performance can never disappear, although at times it may seem quite blurred” (29). The act of writing in dramatic form automatically aligns the text with theatre and, therefore, with performance. In fact, many closet dramas have been successfully adapted for the stage. Furthermore, these texts have moved into the performance canon of Western theatre. In his book *Tragic Seneca*, for instance, A.J. Boyle argues that Seneca’s plays were written for performance. Seneca’s plays, “have been and are performed,” meaning that they can at least be analyzed as performable even if performance intent can never be proven (Boyle 11). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* (1808 and 1832) is another example of a closet drama that has become a performance text despite the author’s claims that “the work was unstageable” (Postlewait 282). Examining closet drama thus requires considering what exactly ‘performance intent’ means.

*The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* warns in its definition of closet drama that “the term sometimes carries a negative connotation, implying that such works either lack sufficient theatrical qualities to warrant staging or require theatrical effects beyond the capacity of most…theatres” (Postlewait 282). When the label ‘closet drama’ is applied to a text, what specifications are scholars using? Is closet drama ‘intended for reading,’ or is it ‘unperformable’? Assuming for a moment the stance that any text can be performed--is, in fact, stageable--then what exactly is meant by ‘theatrical qualities’ or ‘unstageable’? What framework is used to understand closet drama’s relationship to theatre?
Approaching the genre as a feminist scholar further complicates the definition. The relationship between marginalized groups and performance is uneasy. Historic and systemic marginalization in theatre history means that alternative forms of cultural engagement require different cultural approaches to understand and interpret unconventional dramatic texts. While a male playwright might deliberately ‘reject’ live performance, is it possible for a woman to make the same artistic decision when, for instance, the commercial stage is inaccessible? If a woman argues that her plays are not for live performance, might there be a more complex rationale for turning against the stage and using print instead? The above questions lead to more pertinent questions: Were ‘closet dramas’ by women actually rejecting theatrical production? Was printed drama an alternative stage that enabled other, politically relevant performance through print? If there does exist a performance in print, how does it perform? Does the political context of these ‘closet dramas’ influence the content? If there is a political statement being ‘performed’ in print, is the term ‘closet drama’ even appropriate? By repositioning closet drama alongside questions of marginalization and representation on the stage, the actual label, ‘closet drama,’ becomes part of a larger problem of how theatrical canons and theatre historians marginalize women dramatists.

My thesis focuses on two British playwrights from the early modern period, Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639) and Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), and two Americans from the modern period, Djuna Barnes (1892-1982) and Marita Bonner (1898-1971). I divide this document between the early modern and modern periods for three reasons. First and foremost, in relation to print, the early modern and modern periods represent a decisive split between early, elite printing, and mass production as seen in the twentieth century. Second, the early modern and modern periods demonstrate a shift in the divide between the public and private spheres. As
women gained more rights in society, they also gained access to theatre spaces and, therefore, live performance. Finally, while early modern closet drama was limited to aristocratic women, unperformed drama of the modern period was further complicated by questions of sexuality and race. Factoring in questions of race and sexuality forces a contemporary re-evaluation of how and why modern unperformed texts remain isolated from performance space.

**Print and theatre**

Considering that theatre history tends to privilege live performance in accumulating ‘relevant’ historical play-texts, how are dramatic texts conventionally understood? From a contemporary perspective, a play-text is most often viewed in service to the performance. Worthen explains that “dramatic performance has increasingly come to be understood on the model of print transmission, as a reproduction and reiteration of writing” (8). That is not to say that all performance is based on play-texts or that performance stems only from text but rather that when a play-text is involved, there is immediately a relationship between the performance and the text. At the same time, however, print as significant to performance remains a primarily modern concept. The ability to mass-produce play-texts in the nineteenth century refocused theatre through access to plays in print rather than performance.

Worthen argues that “print inflects writing with certain properties, and with certain values as property, urging the singular, authorial and authorized identity of the work across its many reproductions” (7). Play-texts thus went from being insignificant to the performance to being the basis of ‘legitimized’ performance as dictated by the playwright. Ubersfeld warns, however, that “the (poetic) meaning of the literary text disappear[s] or cannot be perceived because [it has] been erased or lost by the actual system of performance” (5). Performance is
based on interpretation through actor, designer, and director. Furthermore, while the text is static, cultural and social progress changes and challenges how the text is reinterpreted. Because performance is an interpretation of the play-text, specific meanings within the play-text may be unintentionally sacrificed through performance.

**Print, performance, and universality**

Repositioning print and performance in relation to gender, race, and sexuality problematizes the discussion of print and performance. Both print and theatre have long been interpreted as ‘masculine’ spaces. Wendy Wall notes that in the early modern period, “women were specifically discouraged from tapping into the newly popular channel of print; to do so threatened the cornerstone of their moral and social well-being” (280). Furthermore, in early modern England, “attitudes towards female performance…were markedly more negative” and women only accessed the English commercial stage during the Restoration in 1660 (Dillon 135).

By the early twentieth century, print and theatre were accessible to women but maintained entrenched in misogynistic, heteronormative, and racist values that limited women’s roles and representations. In the collection *Staging Desire: queer readings of American theatre history*, Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke note that sexuality influenced “how [LGBTQ playwrights] performed [their sexuality]” because of social stigma, oppression, and censorship that forced codified explorations of sexuality (5). For women, even little theatres limited representations of ‘queer’ identities that did not fit the traditional monogamous and heterosexual roles. Judith E. Barlow thus notes that in the Provincetown Players, “lesbian sexuality…was a subject [women playwrights] either chose not to explore, or were not welcome to explore” on stage (Introduction, *Women Writers* 15).
In the United States, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958) was the first play by a black woman playwright to reach Broadway. Kathy Perkins, in her introduction to *Black Female Playwrights: an anthology of plays before 1950*, notes that despite the contributions of black women to American theatre prior to Hansberry, their works are “rare and hard to find” and often “remain unheralded” (1). Despite lacking recognition for their early work, black “women outnumbered men in submitting plays” to Harlem Renaissance journals (Perkins 5).

In my thesis, I suggest that understanding print and performance in relation to the closet drama genre changes when understanding that print and performance served the non-dominant culture differently. Therefore, in examining closet drama by women, understanding that print intermingled with performance in both the early modern and modern periods for marginalized groups adds new dimensions to the genre. For women in particular, print was ‘legitimized’ performance. Live performance, while possible for some women closet dramatists, was not always either accessible or useful for cultural or political reasons. The act of publication, however, functioned as a culturally significant performance. Moreover, if print represented an act of agency or authorial status, then print gave women control over the content and interpretation of their texts.

**Case studies**

My first chapter examines Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613) as a subversion of neo-Senecan closet drama that performs as her political voice. Cary’s historical status as the first English woman to write an original tragedy offers insights into two interesting dilemmas often explored by closet drama scholars. Because early modern closet drama existed strictly for reading, there was no expectation of performance; the privacy of writing a play to be
read enabled women to participate in theatrical creation through text. Cary’s *Mariam*, however, is not easily defined as closet drama, in that its content and form challenged early modern notions of public and private spheres, and of women’s political voice. Subverting the closet drama genre enabled Cary to create a political performance from a female perspective.

Where Cary could not access the stage, Margaret Cavendish chose closet drama over live production throughout the Interregnum and Restoration. Her popularity and celebrity later in her life reveals a complex understanding of how the public viewed and interpreted the female body. In chapter 2, I examine how, through publication, Cavendish removed the limitations of live performance in order to construct an imaginary stage where the physical body did not exist. Understanding that the live body could restrict audience identification with characters and limit the educational value of theatre, Cavendish attempted to control the interpretations and expectations of readers of her collection *Playes* (1662) by emphasizing imaginary spaces and deconstructing expectations of genders through dedications and notes to the reader. Cavendish’s imaginary stage is exemplified in her play *Love’s Adventures* (1662).

Chapter 3 examines Djuna Barnes’s use of print to create metatheatrical drama that defied both theatrical and anti-theatrical space. Difficult in their obscurity, plays like *Three from the Earth* (1919), *Madame Collects Herself* (1918), and *To the Dogs* (1923) attempt to change male-centred, heteronormative narratives by interrupting expected dramatic conventions. While not explicitly dealing with distinctly ‘queer’ imagery, Barnes depicted unconventional sexualities that defied sexist, misogynistic, and moralistic traditionalism to reframe and rework cultural ‘norms.’ Barnes’s work challenged most of her modern contemporaries in its refusal to adapt narratives into an accessible and universal form, thereby alienating the dominant culture.
Finally, Chapter 4 examines Marita Bonner’s use of dramatic print to construct a political platform. Written during the Harlem Renaissance, Bonner’s three plays, *The Pot Maker: a play to be read* (1926), *The Purple Flower* (1928), and *Exit, an Illusion* (1929), were never staged. The dramatic legacy of these plays, however, reveals that Bonner’s work represented culturally significant ideas that anticipated the Civil Rights movement. Bonner’s plays in print gave her a space to express her political ideologies and call for unification to fight oppression based on race, class, and gender.

**Conclusion**

My thesis ultimately suggests the limitations of the term ‘closet drama’ when applied to marginalized playwrights from the early modern and modern periods. Each of my case studies examines how print served a specific performative and political purpose for individual playwrights in specific socio-historical contexts. I argue that these dramatists used printed playtexts to subvert social restrictions of the dominant society, access new spaces, and reframe and confront traditional narratives. These playwrights used print to perform controversial and progressive ideas without restraint.
CHAPTER 1

“BE AND SEEM”:
ELIZABETH CARY’S SUBVERSION OF THE CLOSET DRAMA GENRE

According to the popular sixteenth-century book *The instruction of a Christian woman*, a woman should “apply herself to virtue, and be content with a little, and take in worth that she hath, nor seek for other that she hath not” (Vives qted. in Aughterson 70). Elizabeth Cary sought to redefine her personal worth through religious independence, education, and publication. Cary had difficulty navigating the social expectations placed on her sex and was unwilling to remain silent in the face of personal affronts. For instance, when her husband refused her an allowance after their separation and her conversion to Catholicism, she petitioned the King to intervene on her behalf, and was successful (Weller and Ferguson 205). Cary’s insistence on being heard is perhaps most evident in her writing, published and circulated during her lifetime. While her biographer claims that she “wr[ote] many things…all in verse” for private consumption, there is evidence that suggests her work was both a public and popular pastime (*The Lady Falkland* 189).\(^1\) Although many of her works have been lost, documentation of her writing reveals a collection of well-received works on politically relevant topics. These works include a lost play of the life of Tamburlaine, a prose narrative called *The History of the Life, Reign, and Death of Edward II* (c.1627),\(^2\) translations of Seneca’s tragedies, an English translation of the

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\(^1\) Many scholars believe the author of Cary’s biography, *The Lady Falkland: Her Life*, was her daughter Anne Cary, with subsequent edits to the finished manuscript done by her son, Patrick. While the biography is an important source of information concerning Cary, critics note that the biographer constructs a very specific, positive image of Cary. See Bennett, “Female Performativity in *The Tragedy of Mariam*,” 296-98, and Weller and Ferguson, 1.

\(^2\) The authorship of this work is still in contention. It has often been attributed to Cary’s husband, Henry Cary, but more recent articles attribute the work to Cary herself. As for the play, it is unclear if *Edward* is a translation, an adaptation, or a revised work, or even if it is complete. See Weller and Ferguson, 14-15, and Foster, 146. The copy
controversial Catholic text Réplique a la reponse du sérénissme roy de la Grand Bretagne, and her best-known work, The Tragedy of Mariam (1613). The circulation of these texts and their survival suggests Cary’s writing existed for public consumption and not just “private entertainment” (The Lady Falkland 188). Moreover, the fact that these texts engaged critically with contemporary politics surrounding the monarchy and religion reveals that she was politically active in early modern society.

Cary’s play The Tragedy of Mariam has become a central focus for feminist theatre scholars. Unconventional in style, form, and content, Mariam defies historical conventions of early modern women’s writing and publication, as well as early modern neo-Senecan closet drama. Instead, it encapsulates a complex duality between public and private space, written to be read rather than performed and yet conscious of live performance. Mariam adapts performance ideas in print, intimating performance intent while maintaining structural similarities to non-performance play-texts.

This stylistic ambivalence is echoed by the political content of the play. Mariam is concerned with the divide between public and private in relation to the role of women. The content of the play is clearly both politically conscious and socially critical from a specifically female perspective. The text includes a series of ruminations, debates, and critiques on the positions women occupy in society and how those positions need to be navigated. From a contemporary perspective, the dramatic structure, style, and public circulation of Mariam complicates traditional theatrical narratives of the history of performance. Rather, Mariam does not easily occupy any specific label, existing between print and performance, public and private,

in the Taylor Family Digital Library of the University at Calgary is listed under Henry Falkland. For an in-depth analysis of this particular work, see Wynne-Davis, 187-203.  
3 The Reply of the Most Illustrious Cardinall of Perron. Cary’s translation was “smuggled into England [and] suppressed by Archbishop Abbot; only a few copies of the impression escaped burning.” Weller and Ferguson, 11.  
4 The version of Mariam used in this chapter is reprinted in Cerasano and Wynne-Davies.
original and indebted to other authors. Cary’s rejection of the neo-Senecan closet drama style when combined with her exploration of women’s roles in early modern society reveals a subversive reframing of conventional ideology. She used traditional structure to comment on her gender status in society. Labelling Mariam as closet drama ignores Cary’s manipulation of social restrictions to perform through print. At the same time, without a performance history of Mariam, and the inability to prove, one way or another, whether Cary was interested in having her play performed, the play can only be considered through its text. Therefore, the question of how the play functioned through print becomes central to its significance in theatre history.

In this chapter, I will argue that Mariam is a play-text that subverts theatrical restrictions placed on women in the early modern period. Mariam seems to be a closet drama but can also be a stageable play in a performance venue. By subverting the non-performance genre of closet drama, Cary’s use of a female perspective created a performance text that aligns readers with and questions the role of women in early modern society. Once published, Mariam allowed Cary to act through the characters of the play in order to give herself a political voice.

**Women in the early modern period and the politics of “be and seem”**

Cary’s upbringing represented the difficulties faced by many aristocratic women of the period. Women were expected to behave with modesty and chastity while pursuing the ultimate goal of marriage and family. According to Theresa Kemp, in the early modern period a woman was “a figure that need[ed] to be contained” (31). Women were considered “inherently inferior, uncontrollable, and prone to a wide range of vices and disabilities” (Kemp 31). Education “was explicitly designed to reinforce” the social position of women as inferior and restrict them to the domestic space (Clarke 20). While some humanist scholars advocated a full education for noble
women, such education was meant only to benefit women’s positions as wives and mothers. In other words, an educated wife “would create better spiritual and intellectual ties” with her family and therefore create a better household overall (Warnicke 40). Independent pursuits outside of the home were neither expected nor encouraged for women.

Elaine V. Beilin suggests that “a source of continual conflict [for Cary was her] attempt to live the ‘masculine’ life of the mind while devotedly carrying out the role and duties of a woman” (157). As a child, Cary was precocious, supposedly learning Latin, French, Transylvanian, and Hebrew “without being taught” (The Lady Falkland 186). Her innate curiosity and intelligence, however, were seen as a concern by her mother, Elizabeth Symondes, when it came to marriage. According to Cary’s biographer, Symondes had her daughter’s letters to her husband written by another woman (The Lady Falkland 189). While the reason for the forgery is unclear, Barbara Lewalski wonders if Cary’s mother believed that her daughter’s letters would “display learning or sentiments [that her future husband, Henry] Cary would find disturbing” (182). The deception reveals the cultural distrust of educated women in the seventeenth century, particularly when these women were unmarried.

Despite Cary’s independence, she still embraced the expectations of both her family and her husband and attempted to be a ‘good woman.’ Barry Weller and Margaret Ferguson note that Cary “evidently tried for years to bend her will to her husband’s” prior to the disintegration of their marriage (4). Her subjugation of her own interests and pursuits to her husband’s exacting standards indicates that Cary had internalized the conflict between what was expected from her as wife and mother, and her personal desires. Trying to balance her personal self and the role she was expected to perform likely led Cary to her motto, “be and seem” (The Lady Falkland 195).

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5 See Warnicke for the evolution of humanist education and women in England, 39-54.
Performing a socially acceptable identity did not equal the true self, but allowed a level of freedom to act outside cultural restrictions.

Cary passed the motto along to her daughter, engraving it on her wedding ring. By that time, however, Cary herself had likely given up any pretext of subservience to her wifely and motherly duties. Although the marriage between her and her husband Henry Cary began amiably, it had deteriorated by 1626 and the couple separated. This separation is often attributed to her public conversion to Catholicism, a scandalous act in Protestant England. Her conversion was not intended to be publicized, however, and therefore needs to be considered as part of Cary’s struggle to “be and seem.” Her belief in Catholicism likely stemmed from the autonomy offered women through martyrdom in biblical narratives, so that the act of conversion illustrates her precarious position in Renaissance England. As an early modern woman, she wanted to maintain her individuality despite the constraints of social obligations and expectations. Her play served as both an interrogation of the difficult position she occupied and as a way to assert her political voice.

_Mariam_ revolves around questions of women’s independence, autonomy, and voice in marriage and in public. Based on Josephus’s _Jewish Antiquities_, the play is the first full-length original tragedy in English by a woman. The lead character, Mariam, has been trapped in a marriage to King Herod, who murdered her brother and grandfather. When news arrives in the city that Herod is dead, Mariam is conflicted in her feelings regarding her husband’s death, while the household struggles with the political implications of the king’s death. Herod’s sister, Salome, struggles with her loss of power and her inability to divorce her husband; Mariam’s

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6 Frances E. Dolan’s wonderful book _Whores of Babylon, Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture_ examines how Catholicism served women’s search for autonomy, particularly in the home. Dolan also suggests that Protestants equated the Catholic Church with evil feminine figures like the whore of Babylon.
mother, Alexandra, encourages Mariam to celebrate her liberation from her marriage; and finally, Herod’s ex-wife, Doris, struggles with her status as usurped wife and queen. The second half of the play depicts the fallout from the revelation that Herod is actually alive and the fatal consequences of his unexpected and triumphant return.

Given the disintegration of Cary’s marriage documented in her biography, scholars often draw parallels between Cary and Mariam. Beilen calls these parallels “striking,” especially in relation to Cary’s marriage (173). For Beilin, Cary’s inability to conform to the demands of her husband, her family, or even Protestantism can easily be read into Mariam’s own fatal rejection of her husband and position (173). Marta Straznicky, however, cautions against the biographical lens for interpretations of Mariam. In her essay “The Profane Stoical Paradoxes: The Tragedie of Mariam and Sidnean Closet Drama,” Straznicky argues that:

In the case of Mariam, the dates of composition are far too vague to permit the kind of life/art connection wrought by earlier critics. Cary’s admittedly severe marital conflicts did not begin until 1625, some twelve years after the play was published and as many as twenty-two years after composition. (106)

Straznicky’s concern over equating the personal with the fictional narrative is valid and remains a fundamental problem in feminist analyses. For Cary, the biographical lens denies the creative voice and agency that she clearly demonstrated by her reinterpretation of the Josephus text. Furthermore, the political and social commentary that permeates Mariam can easily be read in the socio-historical context of women’s experiences in the early modern period. Therefore, the biographical lens is useful in allowing insight into how women managed social expectations while pursuing independent interests in the seventeenth century. Fiction allowed Cary to

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7 The manuscript is believed to have been completed sometime between 1602-1605. See Straznicky, Privacy, 106.
construct an original drama to comment, dissect, and reveal the problem with gendered expectations by using traditional, acceptable, and recognizable narratives and forms. While not necessarily indebted to Cary’s personal experiences, *Mariam* represents an important perspective on women from a woman of the period. The fictional Mariam can be viewed as an avatar that, through printed drama, allowed Cary to speak freely.

The argument of Alexandra G. Bennett’s article “Female Performativity in *The Tragedy of Mariam*” is that “be and seem is a key that unlocks diverse possibilities for female agency in both Cary’s life and her drama” (294). Cary’s lived experience offers insight into the personal struggles of early modern women. Her play, however, demonstrates her subversion of the acceptable feminine roles in order to create a political voice. *Mariam* thus embodies an early and ambitious performance of “be and seem” in the text itself, as well as in the actual content of the play meaning characters, plot, and action.

**Closet drama, the commercial theatre, and women**

Understanding Cary’s subversion of closet drama structure and form in *Mariam* requires an examination of how and why closet drama functioned in the early modern period. First and foremost, closet dramas differed from commercial plays, not only because they were developed for reading, but in how they were printed. Printing for publication was an expensive process, but according to Cyndia Susan Clegg, “there was a sufficient number of readers…interested enough in drama to warrant regularly printing plays” (24). Closet drama had a different audience from plays in performance. Plays in print were considered morally superior because reading was a private act. Playhouses were central to anti-theatrical critiques founded on religious doctrine and

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8 Elizabeth Sauer has a good overview of anti-theatricality during the early modern period, 80-95.
were also subject to political censorship. While performance had negative associations because of live bodies, reading plays was considered morally acceptable because there was no temptation of the body.

Despite the fact that noble women were literate, reading and writing in the commercial marketplace of publication was dominated by men. These patriarchal perceptions meant that the readership for dramatic writing was presumed to be primarily male, with male authors and playwrights dominating publication. Viewing the act of publishing and writing as inherently masculine likely contributed to what Karen Raber describes as “the sexualization of the marketplace” (46). Men equated writing to a sexual act that, in turn, attracted readership. For women, publication and speech were also considered explicitly sexual but in a negative light, and as “tantamount to prostitution” (Raber 45). Women’s writing had therefore somehow to occupy a space that was neither private nor public in order to be published, and women writers developed methodologies to enable authorial agency by distancing, framing, or aligning their published works with proper social expectations. These methodologies included posthumous publications and genres such as maternal advice books, translation, and practical instruction in being a wife, mother, or woman. Closet drama, because of its association with the private space of the home, was deliberately removed from performance, and therefore from public space.

In reality, the private and public division in aristocratic households was not easily delineated. According to Raber, the household of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was “the double of and a support for the public and political through the

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9 A good example of how print could circumvent the restrictions of performance is Samuel Daniel’s Philotas (1604). After the political backlash to the staging of his play, Daniel used publication as a “recuperative move, a way of depoliticizing a dissident play.” Straznicky, Privacy, 50-52.
10 For a full discussion of early modern readers, see Clegg, 23-38.
11 For a discussion of the act of writing and its connection to early modern ideas of prostitution, see Wall.
12 For more information in how women published in the early modern period, see North, 68-82, Clarke, 17-48, and Snook, 40-53.
household/state analogy” (53). Private space intersected with the public sphere because of the political relevance of aristocratic homes. At the same time, because the space was domestic, it was not public. Closet drama deftly occupied the problematic space between public and private by existing as a social, but private, act for closet dramatists. Women could use the home as a space for non-public performance. As Raber notes, closet drama as a genre is “highly duplicitous, using the pretense of deliberate containment to produce, not hinder a woman’s public voice” (154). In publishing closet drama, women further removed public/private boundaries.

Straznicky argues that “early modern printed drama could be made rhetorically discontinuous with the commercial theatre…and could therefore generate alternative discourses around theatricality, privacy, and the female body” (“Reading the Body” 60). The specificity of closet drama readers meant that a select, politically influential audience engaged with the content of the texts. Such a select audience meant that the dramatist could anticipate how to construct their work to best express their ideology. Nancy A. Gutierrez associates the form with “long soliloquies and monologues, […] stichomythic dialogue[,]… [a] reduced number of actors on stage…and the presence of the chorus” that coded neo-Senecan plays as “intellectual or lyric” and therefore not written for performance (237). Intellectualism, however, was considered uniquely masculine, and therefore women who participated in the genre still needed to manipulate the presentation of their work.

Constructing the creative self: audience and reception

The neo-Senecan closet drama of the seventeenth century was introduced to the English audience by Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke. Historically, Sidney is best known for the
completion of her brother Philip Sidney’s *Psalms*, but she was also the first woman to publish an original dramatic verse.\(^{13}\) Her translation of Robert Garnier’s *Marc Antonie, The Tragedy of Antonie*, published in 1592,\(^ {14}\) became the stylistic foundation for other closet dramatists of the period. Under Sidney's guidance, Tina Krontiris argues, her estate became known as a “literary centre” where numerous writers, philosophers, and scholars gathered to debate and discuss political and philosophical ideas (156). Beilin describes the image cultivated by Sidney’s circle of their patron as “a virtuous lady” who “facilitate[d] and encourage[d] the work of male writers” (125). The identity men constructed for Sidney transformed her from independent writer into creative muse, there to give inspiration to the men in her charge.

Scholarship on Sidney discusses the strategies she used to better promote her work. The literary space, located in the politicized boundaries of her Wilton estate, allowed for a specific, influential, and knowledgeable audience. Her family’s royal connections meant that Sidney was aware of the political status of those who read her work. Furthermore, Krontiris argues that Sidney had to have been familiar with Garnier’s association with “liberal ideas” and his “preoccup[ation] with the theme of political corruption and women’s role as agents of justice” when she chose to translate his play and circulate her translation (164). Despite evidence that Sidney was using her closet drama to present a specific commentary, Krontiris notes that most of Sidney’s writing was published “in honour of her brother” (164). Rather than create an independent artistic identity, Sidney cultivated her patron image instead. While *Antonie* can be

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\(^{14}\) Mary Sidney’s translation was originally published as *Antonius: A Tragedie* in 1592. The 1595 publication was called *The Tragedie of Antonie* and this is the title commonly referred to in most scholarship. See Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, 17-18.
interpreted as a political expression, Krontiris argues that because Sidney “stuck closely to the original text,” it is indicative of “how hesitant she was to appear assertive” (158).

Although a connection between Cary and Sidney has not been definitively proven, Straznicky argues that “there is enough circumstantial evidence to suggest that [Cary] was aware of and influenced by [the Sidney circle's] literary projects from an early age” (*Privacy* 49). These connections exist in two noteworthy acquaintances who knew both Sidney and Cary: John Davies of Hereford and the poet Michael Drayton. Davies was a member of Sidney's literary circle and also Cary’s tutor. Drayton, in turn, was a friend of Sidney circle playwright Samuel Daniel and was also employed by Cary's father. Drayton dedicated two sonnets to Cary, praising “the many rare perfections where-with nature and education [had] adorned [her],” and stating that “England by [her] birth will add one more Muse to the Muses” (59). Davies, in his preface to *Muse's Sacrifice, or Divine Meditations*, praises both Sidney and Cary for their creative work. Of Cary he said:

> Thou mak'st Melpomen proud, and my heart great
> of such a pupil, who, in buskin fine,
> With feet of state, dost make thy Muse to meet
> the scenes of Syracuse and Palestine. (Davies, *The Muses Sacrifice*)

This verse not only praises Cary’s intelligence, but also refers to and praises *The Tragedy of Mariam* and her other lost play.¹⁶

Cary’s possible connection to Sidney and her coterie has several implications when examining *Mariam*. First, Sidney’s connections were politically influential, and Cary may

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¹⁵ See Shannon and Straznicky for a discussion of the connections between Davies and Drayton to the Tanfields, Elizabeth Cary, and Mary Sidney.

¹⁶ Lewalski suggests that Cary’s decision to publish *Mariam* may have been the result of Davies’s encouragement, 190.
therefore have anticipated a politically oriented audience that would engage with the text from a specific ideological perspective. Inferring a supportive network of politically engaged readers would add weight to the political criticism that appears in *Mariam*. Second, Cary was aware of the political relevance of the space in which her work circulated. Those reading her work would likely be conscious of her personal style, voice, and creative choices in relation to her source material. Finally, Cary may have been aware of Sidney’s manipulation of her position and image in order to achieve her artistic goals. Straznicky notes that “recent critical work on *The Tragedy of Mariam* has made little of [the] connection” between Cary and Sidney (“Profane Stoical Paradoxes” 105), but if Cary understood how Sidney engaged with patriarchal society, then she would have also understood Sidney’s manipulation of her status and gender to participate in writing.

Sidney’s association with theatrical performance outside the public playhouse further suggests how Cary may have conceived *Mariam*’s dramatic structure. Because Sidney occasionally commissioned and prepared small performances at her estate, Cary may have considered her play-text in relation to similar performances.\(^{17}\) Equally possible is that Cary saw Sidney’s work as paving the way for possible dramatic productions. From her biography, it is clear Cary enjoyed “masques [and] plays” and that she attended performances not just in theatres, but also at court (*The Lady Falkland* 224). Her love of performance means Cary likely saw how staged plays could be adapted to alternative venues with private audiences. As for the dramatic content of her work, *Mariam* is believed to have been read by the playwright Thomas Middleton, indicating that her work was also connected to writing for the stage.\(^{18}\)

\(^{17}\) The King’s Men performed at least once at the Sidney estate and Sidney herself wrote a dramatic verse to perform for a visit from Queen Elizabeth I, although the visit was ultimately cancelled. See Hannay, 142-155.

\(^{18}\) See Holdsworth for similarities between *Mariam* and Middleton’s *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy*, 379-380. See also Weller and Ferguson, 6.
Despite these connections to early modern performance, Cary understood that writing for the stage remained a distant possibility. Furthermore, her decision to publish the play several years after it circulated as a manuscript suggests that she viewed publication as an acceptable alternative to private readership or private performance. The play-text was a way for her to express herself legitimately in a male-dominated society. The legitimized genre ‘closet drama,’ however, became problematized through publication, immediately moving into a public and commercial forum. Stylistically, Cary had to ensure that her publication was aligned with the literary and private space.

*The Tragedy of Mariam in print*

There were two editions of *Mariam* published under the initials E.C. by “the printer Thomas Creede and publisher Richard Hawkins” (Straznicky, *Privacy* 62). The publication process designed how the play-text was printed, including typeface and title page describing the author. According to Straznicky, Creede “had a well-developed sense of drama as literature and of the stratification of readerships” for closet drama (*Privacy* 62). Therefore, the final design of the printed text that emphasized Cary’s “learned” status removed any connection with performance (Straznicky, *Privacy* 62). At the same time, however, *Mariam* in print still maintains unique characteristics that reject strict non-performance parameters. While the play “resembles the most classical of the closet dramas[,]…its accommodation of stage business links it equally with some of the elite dramatic publications emanating from the ‘private’ theatre” (Straznicky, *Privacy* 59). In other words, the way the published play was designed indicates that there is extensive attention to performance details, even if those details were not for specifically commercial theatres.
Taking the analysis one step further, Cary’s method of constructing the story of Mariam subverted acceptable conventions of poetic form. Gutierrez argues that closet drama “provides for [Cary’s] distinctive self-expression as a woman” by adapting the “male-created genres of closet drama and [Petrarchan] sonnets” (241). For Gutierrez, Cary’s conscious decision to adapt the Petrarchan sonnet into her play ultimately subverts and interrogates how such styles portray gender roles. I would further suggest that Cary framed her closet drama to mimic performance traditions in order to politicize her female voice by emphasizing performance possibilities. What I mean by ‘performance possibilities’ is that in recalling ‘private’ performance, Cary positioned her play to emphasize public oration by a female voice. Rosemary Kegl argues that the play “replicate[s] rather than reform[s] the excesses of the popular stage” in order for Cary to make her political point (148). The text, as closet drama, is crafted with the intention to disguise the performance in order to circulate Cary’s political commentary more easily. Therefore, in reading the text as a politicized performance, the content of the play must also be examined to reveal its political commentary.

**The political voice in *Mariam***

Raber argues that Cary represented seventeenth century arguments about women as impure, imperfect, and morally questionable figures by “dramatiz[ing] inconstancy itself, exposing its source”: the patriarchal expectations placed on women (156). The public/private divide for women is the performance of “be and seem” that, by its very nature, creates moral ambiguity in the female figure. For the purpose of my discussion of the political voice in *Mariam*, I will focus on the two primary female characters in the play: Mariam and Salome. These characters exist in opposition to each other, but are central to Cary’s interrogation of “be
and seem.” Mariam’s failure in the play is her inability to “frame disguise,” while Salome is successful because of her duplicity (Cary IV.64).

Mariam’s opening lament, “how oft have I with public voice run on,” sets the stage for Cary’s discussion of public/private voice (Cary I.50). The initial monologue establishes Mariam’s difficult status as bereft widow and free woman, ensuring the audience understands her true self within the rest of the play. Without Herod’s presence, Cary creates a space where Mariam can speak freely. Removing the patriarchal figure makes the space private and readers can in turn view Mariam’s monologue as an act occurring within acceptable parameters: not in public. In the context of the play, Mariam is speaking privately, but within the context of the play-text, Mariam’s speech is circulating publicly. At the opening of the play, Mariam is physically nowhere until other characters begin to interact with her. Laurie J. Shannon argues that Mariam “uses extended dramatic monologues, speeches, and choruses to develop themes of women’s problematic participation in social systems of communication and exchange” (138). Mariam’s reflection on the “one object [that] yields both grief and joy,” Herod’s death, emphasizes emotional duality, the ability to have conflicting feelings at one time (Cary I.50). When Mariam is discovered by her mother Alexandra, she immediately states, “but tears, fly back and hide you in your banks, You must not be to Alexandra seen” (Cary I.50). When Alexandra intrudes on Mariam’s thoughts, Mariam loses her ability to be truthful. At the same time, however, the reader is made aware of her internal struggle. Cary thus successfully frames the play through Mariam, forcing the reader to identify the inherent problem in gender expectations that prevented women from being honest.

Shannon argues that the larger concern in Mariam is “the impossibility of moral stability or purity when an authority creates laws whose ‘justice’ operates to the detriment of those to
whom the law applies” (136). Although deceiving is in theory immoral, that deceit is required in order to maintain the patriarchal structure, but also to survive. Beilin suggests that the play is structured to “make Mariam’s conflict between obedience to and rebellion against Herod’s authority the central concern” (166). ‘Conflict’ is perhaps too strong a word, because Mariam is doomed from the beginning of the play. In fact, Cary’s decision to use the biblical figure of Mariam suggests she was particularly interested in how the system formed by Herod, but broadly representative of early modern society, failed Mariam.

S.P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies note that Cary’s creative choices in her version of Mariam’s story “elaborate[ed] on the personal feelings of her characters, especially Mariam, and alter[ed] Josephus’s depictions of the queen as a coquettish shrew, in order to accentuate [her] virtue” (46). Cary allowed Mariam to speak in the text in order to establish her as an individual but also as a representative of women between public and private spaces. Cary literally writes out Mariam’s internal struggle about Herod prior to his introduction as a character. Ultimately, and unjustly, Mariam is punished at the end of the play for her outspokenness. Her refusal to lie to Herod and admit any affection makes Herod suspicious of “a drink procuring love” delivered by a Butler supposedly at her behest (Cary IV.65). Perhaps the most tragic component of Cary’s narrative is that Mariam’s rebellion against Herod is ultimately a small and simple act. To survive, Mariam only has “to but smile” (Cary IV.65). Herod’s anger at her refusal to pretend at happiness leaves him, ironically, susceptible to Salome’s lies and manipulations.

I agree with Donald Foster’s assertion that, “crafty, witty, and irrepressible, Salome shoulders most of the play’s dramatic energy” (153). Although Salome begins the play at a disadvantage to Mariam, having lost her power through Herod’s death, she causes extensive
chaos resulting in the deaths of several characters. Salome is dangerous because she is aware of the limits of her power. Early in the play, during a heated exchange with Alexandra, Salome reflects that Alexandra would “not have given [her] tongue the rein if noble Herod still remained in life” (Cary I.52). Using Herod as a representative figure of patriarchal power turns Salome into a figure that both reinforces and benefits from the patriarchal structure. Without her brother, Salome’s manipulations are less successful; they only become truly dangerous when Herod is present. For instance, though Salome attempts to manipulate her lover, Silleus, into killing her husband, Constabarbus, she is unsuccessful. Constabarbus “ope[’s his] bosom to” Silleus in a show of friendship rather than killing him (Cary II.60). After Herod’s return, however, Salome is successful in ensuring Constabarbus’s demise. Significantly, while Salome uses speech to her advantage, it is the men around her who act. That is not to say that she is not an active character, but it is the men who must ultimately translate her words into actions. Silleus attacks Constabarbus, and Herod executes Mariam.\[19\]

By the end of the play, Salome capitalizes on Mariam’s refusal to pretend by convincing Herod to execute her. She points out the discrepancy between Mariam’s inner and outer selves, with Mariam’s voice acting as the intersection between truth and deceit:

She speaks a beauteous language, but within,
Her heart is false as powder, and her tongue
Doth but allure the auditors to sin,
And is the instrument to do you wrong. (Cary IV.68)

\[19\] In a subplot, Salome’s brother Pheroras marries a woman, Graphina, beneath his station. Salome offers to help convince Herod to accept the marriage in exchange for his delivering information about Constabarbus to Herod. Cary unifies Salome’s power through three separate instances.
While the reader can see the manipulation, having witnessed Mariam’s struggle over the course of the play, Herod is easily swayed. He is wrong in his decision, but recognizes his error too late. The chorus even condemns Herod’s ignorance, stating:

had [Herod] with wisdom now her death delayed,

He at his pleasure might command her death;

But now he hath his power so much betrayed,

As all his woes cannot restore her breath. (Cary V.74)

The condemnation of Herod is particularly interesting because Herod himself blames Salome. He claims that if she “hadst not made Herod insecure,” he would not have had Mariam executed (Cary IV.69). Salome is dismissive of her brother’s blame. Although not a moral character, she is not to blame for Mariam’s execution. Salome could only manipulate Herod because of his insecurities. Therefore, she is not responsible for using her abilities to her advantage.

Salome’s speech is only ‘public’ when others choose to listen to her. She influences the public by ensuring she is heard by manipulating the desires of those around her. Mariam, on the other hand, refuses even the smallest display of dishonesty. Bennett notes that despite Mariam’s status as honest, there is the “possibility of a deliberate discrepancy between [Mariam’s] inner and outer selves” that makes her character less “stable” (“Female Performativity in The Tragedy of Mariam” 300). After all, Mariam is ultimately honest with Herod, but her honesty is brought about only by Herod’s supposed death and subsequent return. Mariam’s struggle with the emergence of her true feelings is structured to influence the reader’s sympathy with her defiance of Herod’s command. Bennett explains that “in order to maintain her articulation of herself as an autonomous subject, [Mariam] must resist all temptations to reformulate her means of agency”
Salome’s success, in contrast, removes her agency because her power exists through others.

Cary carefully balances condemning honesty over the course of the play. Salome’s ability to manipulate through words and wield her position as Herod’s sister destroys Mariam. Mariam’s refusal to participate in manipulation results in her execution. Within the play, however, Cary suggests that it is the structure in which Mariam and Salome are forced to mediate their voices that is actually the problem. Gutierrez argues that Cary’s play is “less didactic and more mimetic” than other closet dramas (243). The plot of Mariam was significant to constructing the central debate within the play: the role of women in society. Both Mariam and Salome are given space to comment and reflect on the limits of their positions and the problem of these limitations in terms of how they achieve their respective goals. The chorus “who remain on stage throughout” serve as figures that reflect on the moral dilemmas of each act, warning against each and every decision made by Mariam (Cary I.50). In the closing of the play, the chorus states:

This day’s events were certainly ordained,
To be the warning to posterity;
So many changes are therein contained,
So admirable strange variety.
This day alone, our sagest Hebrews shall
In after-times the school of wisdom call. (Cary V.75)

Within this address, Cary is clearly interested in highlighting that the events of the play represent and address a much larger, overarching sociological issue: what do existing social structures

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20 By mimetic, Gutierrez is using the term in a genre-specific context to refer to “a series of human actions so organized as to effect a certain emotional and intellectual response from the audience.” See Gutierrez, 243.
mean for women? And how does a woman remain virtuous when the structure only wants false truths?

Women of the early modern period were stuck in a complex, politicized situation that forced immoral and dishonest behaviour in order to maintain a specific social structure. Salome and Mariam were individually motivated characters. The reasons for their individual motivations for how and why they acted as they did in the play were integral to Cary’s social commentary on the relationship women had to public space and public speech. The metatheatrical function of Cary’s neo-Senecan adaptation realigned the content of the text with questions of public and private performance. She used an identifiable and socially acceptable genre that complicated the position of the text in relation to the public and private sphere. Furthermore, as I will suggest below, Cary subverted the emphasis on print and non-performance through the closet drama genre by introducing traditionally performative aspects into the play-text.

**The Tragedy of Mariam and the question of performative intent**

In 1994, *Mariam* was successfully produced as part of the interdisciplinary project Women and Dramatic Production, 1550-1670 at the Alhambra Studio in England. The goal of the project was “to test and challenge the critical assumptions that drama in English by early modern women was not intended for performance, was unperformed, and therefore unperformable” (Findlay et al, “(En)Gendering Performance” 289). Director Stephanie Hodgson-Wright noted that Cary’s play-text functioned easily in performance:

> We were never obliged to force a character on or off the stage artificially; the text provided full stage-management apparatus with respect to the movement of the characters. Each scene is headed with the appropriate participants. A character’s
entrance or exit mid-scene is signalled explicitly or is inherent in the text. (“The Play is Ready to be Acted” 132-133)21

Hodgson-Wright’s reflection reveals that Cary’s text is, at least, performance-conscious. 22

In addition to translating easily to the stage, Hodgson-Wright, Alison Findlay, and Gweno Williams observe that the text “is notable for its numerous stage directions (“The Play is Ready to be Acted” 132), the most significant of which is the one for the fight scene between Constabarus and Silleus, which Hodgson-Wright rightly points out “has no correspondent in the sources” on which the play was based (“The Play is Ready to be Acted” 133). Salome’s manipulation of her new lover Silleus leads to a confrontation between him and her current husband, Constabarus. The scene revolves around the action of the fight, with the outcome reliant on establishing the honour of Constabarus’s character. At first, Constabarus refuses to fight but Silleus is persistent, stating “[Constabarus] bark’st but will not bite” (Cary II.59). Finally, at the taunt of “coward,” Constabarus willingly engages, with Cary adding the stage direction “they fight” (Cary II.59). The battle is described both through the dialogue between the two men, but also with Cary dictating the visual performance. She states that “Constabarus continues to dominate” until Silleus surrenders. Combining dialogue with stage directions indicates Cary was aware of the need to control the visual impact of the scene (Cary II.59). Constabarus dominates, while Silleus is a poor fighter who claims surrender, although his wounds “are less than mortal” (Cary II.59). The language and visual cues function to characterize Constabarus and Salome by demonstrating Constabarus’s unwillingness to fight and

21 For a more detailed account of the technical work done for the production of Mariam at the Alhambra Studio, Bradford, UK, including discussions of set, costumes, cast, and staging, see Findlay, et al, “(En)gendering Performance: Staging Plays by Early Modern Women,” 289-308.

22 Hodgson-Wright argues strongly that Cary wrote Mariam for performance. While I believe the evidence suggests Cary was willing to challenge early modern convention, and her text suggests attention to performance possibilities, it is simply impossible to know her original intention in regard to performance.
Salome’s manipulation and use of Silleus in an attempt to achieve equal power through physical might.

Hodgson-Wright also draws attention to the moment when the Butler delivers the poison, arguing that the scene “revolves around a physical stage property, the cup” (“The Play is Ready to be Acted” 133). As with the sword fight, there is an interesting gap between the act and the outcome:

[Enter] BUTLER

HEROD. What hast thou here?

BUTLER. A drink procuring love.

The queen desired me to deliver it.

MARIAM [Aside].

Did I? Some hateful practice this will prove.

Yet it can be no worse than heavens permit.

HEROD. Confess the truth thou wicked instrument

To her outrageous will: ‘tis poison sure. (Cary IV.64)

Mariam’s aside suggests that action is occurring as she speaks, with Herod examining and becoming suspicious of the cup. The visual and the textual thus become integral to depicting the exact nature of the betrayal. At the same time, the physical relationship between Mariam and Herod changes as the initial forgiveness of Mariam’s rejection changes to anger at the perceived betrayal. The interaction between them leads to Mariam’s execution.

Raber argues that Cary “explicitly and emphatically” draws attention to the “spectacle” of Mariam’s execution (176). Although occurring offstage, Raber believes that Mariam’s described
execution refocuses Cary’s appropriation of common performance tropes to Herod’s reaction to his wife’s death in order to create social commentary:

Having employed spectacle to reaffirm his authority as the sovereign must,

Herod suddenly begins to wish he lived not as the head of the state, but under the authority…that knows these various wonderful tricks…to revive, restore, resurrect—that is, he wishes he existed within the creative domain of the public theatre. (178)

By redirecting the focus of the play away from Mariam’s death to Herod’s grief, Cary highlighted the consequences of his patriarchal expectations: Mariam’s death had no resurrection to forgive his transgression. The seventeenth-century reader was forced to judge Herod instead of Mariam. Staging Herod’s grief also echoed the commercial theatre. Raber notes that in popular plays such as Othello, Desdemona can “recover from Othello’s smothering long enough to fulfill the role of good wife” (178). Cary reflected the common and dominant early modern depictions of women in order to critique the theatrical representation that enabled the patriarchal structure to continue without criticism. The play challenged the accepted depictions of tragedies that made women into ignorant victims to reframe the question of Mariam’s victimhood. The reader is asked to see the consequences from the female perspective in a way live theatre often denied.

Cary’s use of performance cues made a text that could translate to the stage but served to comment on the dominant representations of women in the public space. The theatrical components in Mariam worked in conjunction with the act of publication. Her characterization and interpretation of the Mariam myth were in keeping with Cary’s eventual motto ‘be and seem,’ entering into dialogue with performance conventions and using those conventions to
influence the narrative. Quite literally, Cary created a text that subverted the limitations placed on her as a dramatic artist.

Conclusion

Cary’s interrogation of gender expectations in the early modern period forced her to develop an alternative space for her political voice through print and publication. While *Mariam* is one of Cary’s earliest works, the play represents an engagement with early modern society from a specifically female perspective. Writing as an aristocratic woman, Cary was clearly dissatisfied with gender expectations that expressly refused a woman’s right to autonomy and independence. Combining publication with the closet drama genre allowed Cary to subvert both social and genre restrictions by combining performance cues in the text in order to better complicate the political commentary of her writing.

*Mariam* does not easily represent the tradition of neo-Senecan closet drama introduced by Mary Sidney. Instead, the play demonstrates a fascinating use of creative agency by a young woman who could not access commercial performance space or even express herself overtly in speech or action because of her sex. Publication gave Cary the opportunity to circulate her ideas, to perform through print in a way that gave her a political voice. Simultaneously, Cary constructed a text that can be and has been performed. She may never have achieved even a private live performance in her life time, but Cary did successfully subvert the genre of closet drama. *Mariam* represents what seems to be an act of subjugation but was a rebellion against social expectations.
CHAPTER 2

“FANCY SET UP A STAGE IN MY BRAIN”:
MANDER CAVENDISH AND THE IMAGINARY STAGE

Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, published her first collection of dramatic works in 1662, two years after women were given full access to the stage. In her lifetime, Cavendish would publish numerous works, including a biography of her husband William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle,23 her autobiography, several discourses on science and philosophy,24 poetry, short stories, a novel,25 a collection of letters, and two collections of plays: *Playes (1662)*26 and *Playes, Never Before Printed* (1668).27 Despite her prolific writing in a variety of genres, and extensive efforts by feminist scholars, Cavendish’s contributions remain largely excluded or disparaged in literary, scientific, and philosophical canons.

In her quest for the legacy of women’s writing, Virginia Woolf dismissed Cavendish as little more than “a vision of loneliness and riot” (92), viewing her as a lost opportunity for women writers:

What a waste that the woman who wrote ‘the best bred women are those whose minds are civilest’ should have frittered her time away scribbling nonsense and plunging ever deeper into obscurity and folly till the people crowded round her

23 Hereafter referred to as Newcastle.
24 Cavendish was the first woman to visit the Royal Science Society in 1667. The next time a woman gained access was in 1945. Jo Wallwork’s fascinating essay “Disruptive Behaviour in the Making of Science: Cavendish and the Community of Seventeenth-Century Science” examines the performance of Cavendish’s visit.
25 *Blazing World* is the first English science fiction novel by a woman.
27 This collection includes: *The Sociable Companions, or the Female Wits, The Presence, Scenes, The Bridals, The Convent of Pleasure*, and *A Piece of a Play*.
coach when she issued out. Evidently the crazy Duchess became a bogey to
frighten clever girls with. (92-93)

Woolf was not the first or the last to criticize Cavendish’s writing. In 1668, Samuel Pepys called
her “a mad, conceited, ridiculous woman” (18 March, 1668), while his friend John Evelyn
described Cavendish as “a mighty pretender to learning—particularly poetry, and philosophy”
(158). Even as recently as the 1980s, Cavendish’s work continued to draw ridicule. Stephen
Pile’s *The Incomplete Book of Failures* names Cavendish as “the world’s most ridiculous poet”
(qted. in Browerbank 3).

Part of the difficulty with Cavendish’s writing is the complex ideological, sociological,
and political content and motivation that inspired her unusual writing style. In particular,
Cavendish’s reframing of her femininity as a force of power remains a significant component in
her writing. Her first publication, *Poems and Fancies* (1653), for instance, challenged writing
and publication as an explicitly male domain. In the collection’s “Epistle to Mistres [sic] Toppe,”
she argued that women’s “Braines work usually in a Fantasticall motion” and that women
therefore maintained a creative expertise that male writers lacked (Cavendish, *Poems and
Fancies* A3). Cavendish identified ‘fancy’ as distinctly feminine, positioning her creative
ambition within distinctly ‘feminized’ terms: as part of the ridiculous nature of women. Claiming
creativity as inherent to women subverted what Robert Shoemaker calls a “‘representational
strategy’ in which perceptions about gender differences were imposed on notions of the body” in
the seventeenth century (18). In other words, she changed the interpretation of a woman’s
biological weakness, a woman’s fanciful nature, into an inherent feminine strength. Emerging

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28 Fitzmaurice argues that Cavendish may have been more popular than most scholars believe during her life. He
draws attention to a posthumous book of letters and poems compiled by Cavendish’s husband in memory of her and
praising her work. See Fitzmaurice, 27.

29 Shoemaker actually uses Cavendish’s own musings on femininity to point out the gender biases of the period.
contemporary scholarship has drawn attention to Cavendish’s manipulation of gender bias and stereotypes in her writing to create social commentary. Her plays, in particular, reject traditional theatrical representations of women and men on stage through characterization. The unique female and male characters of Cavendish’s dramatic writing were complicated by her complex dramatic style. She presented her dramatic work through prefaces that outlined the purpose of her characterizations, how her plays needed to be read, and her own opinions about theatre and performance.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Cavendish’s playwriting is her decision not to pursue theatrical production. She was a member of Queen Henrietta Maria’s court, which held numerous performances, she published her work just as English actresses and female playwrights reached the commercial stage, and her husband Newcastle was a playwright. Furthermore, Cavendish was a recognizable celebrity in England and often drew crowds in the street for her unusual fashion and elaborate entourage. While publishing closet dramas, as established in chapter one, was not necessarily a private act, neither was it as publicly assertive as theatrical performance. Alexandra G. Bennett argues that Cavendish’s “efforts as a playwright, in particular, seem to embody this often confusing mixture of advancement and retreat” by adopting the dramatic form but refusing live performance (“Margaret Cavendish and the Theatre of War” 103).

I suggest that Cavendish’s decision to print her plays served a specific purpose that directly related to her perception of the female body in performance in the theatre and in daily life. While in exile, Cavendish witnessed “the Best Female Actor that ever [she] saw” (Sociable Letters 261). Although she had seen numerous productions in a wide variety of culturally different spaces, such as courts (English and French), English commercial theatres, and in
commercial theatres abroad, her description of this actress in Sociable Letters reveals an interesting emphasis on gender in performance. Cavendish described the actress’s performance:

…for Acting a Man’s Part she did it so Naturally as if she had been of that Sex, and yet she was of a Neat, Slender Shape; but being in her Dublet and Breeches, and a Sword hanging by her side, one would have believed she never had worn a Petticoat, and had been more used to Handle a Sword than a Distaff. (Sociable Letters 262)

Sophie Tomlinson suggests that Cavendish was “simultaneously enthralled and disturbed by the actress’s ambidextrous shifting between sexes” (274). In the actress, Cavendish found a living figure that was not confined by her sex and could move easily between the feminine and masculine identities without conflict. After the performance, her “Fancy set up a Stage in [her] Brain,” where there were “several Actors, and [her] Wit played the Jack Fool” (Sociable Letters 262).

This androgynous performance was echoed in Cavendish’s plays, where she examined the connection between the female body and the feminine identity. Without the distraction of the actor’s sex, performance could redefine social roles based on gender. Removing the physical body and repositioning it on an imaginary stage allowed her closet drama to reconstruct masculine space. If Cavendish was interested in questioning issues of gender in the seventeenth century, then she had to consider how her audience would read the female body. Theatre required the audience to suspend their disbelief in order for the narrative to unfold on stage, but the inherent gender bias—the very knowledge that a woman was performing new gender representations—created a paradox. Interrogating gender roles became a performance rather than an interrogation of stereotypes. Cavendish had therefore to remove the physical body to force her
audience to apply questions of gender in an imaginary space without the problem of bodies in performance.

Theatre in the Interregnum served political and social ideologies and the audience needed to engage with the play content in a way that altered conventional perception. Perception, however, was dictated by divisions between the sexes. Women in particular were believed to be “governed by their lower parts, and…susceptible to the irrational influence of their uterus” (Shoemaker 19). In other words, women’s abilities, thoughts, and actions were reduced to biological inferiority that influenced any and all ‘higher’ learning. Both the actor and the audience remained constrained by the physical realities of sex and therefore by gender bias. By emphasizing intellectualization over physical bodies on stage, Cavendish could circumvent prejudiced social expectations, removing visual cues such as the actor’s body, outlining the goals of her plays, and crafting the audience’s interpretive position through direct address. In this chapter, I will argue that Cavendish used printed drama to create an alternative space, an imaginary stage free of the social and political limitations imposed by the male and female body in live performance.

To understand why and how Cavendish constructed her imaginary stage, I will consider her first collection of plays, Playes. Although published in 1662, many of the plays in this collection were written during the Interregnum while Cavendish was in exile. This time period means that the content of the work spans the cultural changes of the Civil War, the Interregnum, and the Restoration while existing prior to women’s access to the English stage. Moreover, Tomlinson points out that Playes “contains a total of eleven prefatory addresses ranging from a justification of their deliberate structural disunity to a prescription for how they are to be read aloud” and therefore reveals authorial intent and agency in extensive detail (276). Cavendish
understood that her sex created an inherent bias in her reader, whether male or female, because of the social and internalized misogyny in English society. How then, could she comment on social, political, and ideological problems that existed because of gender-bias? This is where the imaginary stage was integral to Cavendish’s plays. She used print to create the lens through which her audience should view the content of the play. In order to create the lens, Cavendish had to subvert the expectations of the dominant reader: the misogynistic society. She relocated creativity into the feminine nature, and forced the reader to enter into a strictly feminine space that removed the barriers of the physical body.

Theatre, civil unrest, and Cavendish’s early years

Growing up in the shifting political, cultural and social landscape of the English Civil War strongly influenced Cavendish’s personal ideology. Brenda Liddy notes that “the theme of war is a dominant trope in [Cavendish’s] prose and drama” (86). As the youngest of a Royalist family, she witnessed the devastation of the Civil War first-hand and how social upheaval affected the role of women. The political changes brought about by the removal of the monarchy opened new avenues for women to participate in society through politics and theatre. Cavendish attempted to reconcile her upbringing prior to the Civil War, which limited women’s status, with her misgivings over gender roles and expectations in men and women.

Although the Civil War did not start until 1642, tension between the English Parliament and the monarchy began with several controversial decisions by King James I. The strongly Protestant England was hesitant to accept James’s interest in peace with Roman Catholic nations such as Spain and France. After James I’s death in 1625 and the accession of Charles I to the throne, the relationship between English Parliament, the rising Puritan movement, the English
landowners, and the monarchy steadily deteriorated. Charles I, through his repeated attempts to wrest all power from Parliament, and his marriage to French Catholic Princess Henrietta Maria, did little to address civil unrest. Henrietta Maria became a cultural figurehead for women attempting to redefine the cultural limitations of James I’s England. Her engagement with English society and politics changed women’s perceptions of their roles. For Cavendish, however, Henrietta Maria represented new possibilities for women, but also an emerging pattern in women’s social and political roles.

Born Margaret Lucas in 1623, Cavendish grew up during the most severe changes of the Civil War. She was raised by her mother, Elizabeth Lucas, after the death of her father, Thomas Lucas, in 1625. Elizabeth Lucas was a resourceful woman whose independence and genuine affection for her children was remembered fondly by Cavendish later in life. Unusually, Lucas avoided the traditional parenting model that revolved around discipline and punishment. Instead, Cavendish recalled that her mother reasoned with her children, “presenting the deformities of vice” in contrast to “graces and virtues” (A True Relation 278). Lucas also ensured that her children were properly educated. Unfortunately, the humanist ideology that, under Queen Elizabeth I, had encouraged the education of young noble women was no longer popular. Katie Whitaker explains that under James I, “education for girls went little beyond the most basic skills of reading and writing, and the elementary arithmetic they would need in their household management” (15). The Lucas household encouraged the new division in learning. The children were educated according to their sex. Under her tutors, Cavendish learned singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument, basic writing and needle work—skills that were necessary for a

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30 See Carlin for an overview of all the intersecting causes of the Civil War.
31 Although a woman was not allowed to inherit property and money according to English law, Elizabeth Lucas used her connections at court to circumvent these restrictions, gaining wardship over her eldest son, John Lucas, and, subsequently, the entire estate. Margaret Cavendish believed that her mother took “a pleasure and a pride in the governing [of the estate].” See Cavendish, True Relation, 294 and Whitaker, 10-11.
wife to entertain her husband and run a household (Whitaker 15-16). Later in her life, Cavendish would draw attention to the educational divide between men and women, stating wryly: “it is sufficiently known that [women] being not suffered to be instructed in schools or universities, cannot be bred up [to knowledge]” (Observations 11). She pursued her interests independently before her family was forced to leave their home.

The family’s loyalty to the monarchy meant they were targeted by anti-Royalists as relationships between the monarchy and parliament deteriorated. Alison Findlay explains that “the aristocratic household was in a process of fragmentation and change” as the monarchy, and those who supported it, lost power (54). The Lucas family home was raided several times before the family fled to Oxford. It was in Oxford that Cavendish decided to join Henrietta Maria’s court as a lady-in-waiting. Her new position gave Cavendish insight into the significance of the female body as a performance tool that could undermine traditional expectations by reworking gender-specific roles for social and political power.

The controversies surrounding Henrietta Maria stemmed from her manipulation of her position so as to wield political and religious ideology that directly confronted English religious and cultural restrictions. Through performance, Henrietta Maria revealed her overt dedication to and reaffirmation of Catholicism, which made her an enemy of the English Puritans. Using her role as wife and queen, she constructed an image that enabled her to gather and lead military support for her husband. Performing power by reconstructing traditionally masculine roles through a feminine lens, Henrietta Maria no doubt inspired Cavendish’s fascination with constructing identities, particularly with the female body. Anna Battigelli notes that Henrietta Maria was known for her “protean self-fashioning” through alternative performances of identity, three.

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32 It is widely believed that Lady Victoria from Cavendish’s play Bell in Campo is based on Henrietta Maria. See Tomlinson, 282.
including Queen, Catholic, Amazon, wife, and mother (13, 18). The queen’s various performances served her political and philosophical ideology, particularly through theatre. For instance, the first play she chose to perform in after moving to England, *L’Artenice* (1626), “created an impression of the Queen’s court as introverted, self-absorbed and distanced from the English kingdom” (Findlay 134). Furthermore, she acted as patron to Catholic playwrights. Finally, Henrietta Maria chose to circulate Catholic and Platonic doctrine in her court through Walter Montagu’s play *The Shepherd’s Paradise*.33

In fact, Henrietta Maria’s engagement with theatre contributed to Parliament’s disdain for public playhouses, leading to the closure of the theatres in 1642. Elizabeth Sauer notes that although closing the theatres was in keeping with Puritan anti-theatrical sentiments, “it was also a security measure to discourage riotous assemblies, forestall possible royalist propaganda by the court companies, and prevent the dramatizing of popular grievances” (82). Printed drama, however, did not experience the same restrictions, thus changing the relationship of printed drama to its readership. Without live performance, “playreading became the only legitimate form of theatrical pleasure [and] the individual reading act grew more and more to be imagined as a substitute for playgoing” (Straznicky, *Privacy* 70). Existing outside the strict censorship of the English public playhouses, printed plays became not only overtly political, but also a replacement for live performance. The ability to use print as propaganda served a political interest for royalists. According to Raber, the closure of the theatres and the fact that playwrights followed the monarchy, meant that closet drama existed “as literature produced by royalists in exile” in order to maintain English royalist values abroad, if only in print (193).

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33 Henrietta Maria performed a “marathon eight-hour all-female presentation” of the play (Battigelli 17), which also circulated in manuscript form. Battigelli suggests that Henrietta Maria took a copy with her into exile and that it is likely Cavendish read it. See Battigelli, 138. Prynne’s anti-woman and anti-theatrical text *Histrio-Mastix* came out not long after Henrietta Maria’s performance in 1633.
Cavendish, as both a Royalist in exile and a member of Henrietta Maria’s court, witnessed the new, complicated relationship between print, performance, politics, and gender. Printed play-texts disseminated political ideology, but also functioned to replace live performance that recreated the culture of pre-Civil War England. At the same time, Henrietta Maria’s court combined play-texts and live performance that directly challenged pre-Civil War gender roles and expectations. Henrietta Maria’s militaristic exploits and her use of theatre to affirm her power through codified performances of the female body created an intersection between play-text and physical body in order to assert, remove, or redirect political and cultural power.

Cultural engagement and the female body

Although Henrietta Maria attempted to reinterpret female roles, Cavendish still found social expectations at court difficult to navigate. Henrietta Maria’s court required, and espoused, the Platonic identity of the “honnête woman” who “pursued piety, chastity and compassion” (Findlay 133). Although on the surface this feminine ideal corresponded with Cavendish’s own upbringing, the hypocritical and hostile nature of court life left her frustrated. The honnête woman was a fictional and ideologically based construct, a social performance that women had to adhere to in order to maintain their status and their virtue. “With no foundation to stand [on], or guide to correct [her]” behaviour, Cavendish was constantly afraid that her words would be misconstrued and she would lose her status (Cavendish, A True Relation 287). Because women were expected to behave in a specific way, she became unable and unwilling to engage with
others at court because they were all “apt to lay such aspersions even on the innocent” (Cavendish, *A True Relation* 287).\(^{34}\)

Although Cavendish met her husband Newcastle at court, allowing her to leave her position as lady-in-waiting to live with him, it did not remove her from the politics of interacting within specific political and ideological confines that related directly to her sex. Newcastle, for his part, was incredibly supportive of his wife. A noted playwright and patron of the arts, he encouraged all of his wife’s creative endeavours, writing prefaces in all her books, defending her interests in science, philosophy, and the literary arts, paying for publication, and occasionally co-authoring texts.\(^{35}\) Cavendish claimed that her plays should “never have [been] writ” without her husband because she would never “have had the Capacity [or] Ingenuity to have writ Playes” (*Playes*, “A Dedicatory Epistle” A3). Newcastle’s associates, though, were hardly as encouraging or open to Cavendish’s innate curiosity and willingness to learn.

The company Newcastle kept repeatedly reminded Cavendish of the distinct boundaries that existed between the sexes.\(^{36}\) Not only did her husband’s household host those who “advised [him] against marrying her,” but Cavendish also felt limited by her education when among male scholars (Whitaker 90-91). Kathleen Jones explains that the “inequality of discourse that existed

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\(^{34}\) The surviving letters between William Cavendish and Margaret Cavendish reveal an incredibly hostile environment at court. Cavendish had to repeatedly defend herself against court slander and was accused of being involved with other men. In turn, William Cavendish was accused of courting several women at the same time as Cavendish. See Cavendish, *Letters in reply*, 97-119.

\(^{35}\) William Cavendish was not only a dramatic patron to playwrights like Ben Jonson, he was also father to Lady Jane Brackley and Elizabeth Cavendish. Brackley and Cavendish wrote the closet drama *The Concealed Fancies* (1645) at one of their father’s estates. Neither sister liked their new stepmother. In *The Concealed Fancies*, Cavendish appears as the unflattering figure of Lady Tranquility. See Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, *Introduction to The Concealed Fancies*, 127-129.

\(^{36}\) Newcastle hosted salons when he was in England and continued to host them throughout exile. Participants over the years included Ben Jonson, Thomas Hobbes, and René Descartes.
between men and women” haunted most of her interactions with educated visitors (61-62). Cavendish was expected to perform the traditional role of the wife and remain silent. Being female prevented her from questioning or learning from her husband’s guests, both because of their biases about her sex, and because of her own insecurities and doubts about her lack of education.

The social expectation that women remain silent, chaste, and obedient created an internal struggle that was compounded when Cavendish was forced to petition the Parliamentary Committee in England on behalf of her husband. Petitioning proved humiliating for Cavendish, and she described the committee as “ungentlemanly” (True Relation 298). The incident with the committee convinced her that she was a useless petitioner because of her bashfulness. At the same time, she was critical of the petition process that required “knowing where the power lay” in order to gain favour through flattery (Cavendish, True Relation 300). What Cavendish meant was that rather than genuine necessity, petitioning required performing false piety and respect. Liddy states that “war created an opportunity for women to become more visible and consequently increased their access to public life” (42). Because men were unable to return from exile until the Restoration, women both abroad and stranded in England acted as intermediaries for their families and sometimes argued for their own personal gain. Women, Cavendish believed, made the most of the performance, helping to cement social stereotypes of women as vapid, materialistic, and dishonest creatures. She noted that the “customs of England [were] being changed” and “women [were becoming] pleaders, attornies, petitioners, and the like” (Cavendish, True Relation 299).

37 The most cited example of the distance maintained by Newcastle’s guests is Thomas Hobbes. Despite numerous attempts to befriend and converse with him, Cavendish was repeatedly rebuffed. Battigelli described their relationship as “frosty.” See Battigelli, 65.
Danielle Clarke warns that “it [is] dangerous to equate a pro-woman stance with a female author, or to assume that a female author would not or could not write a misogynist text” (51). Scholars draw attention to Cavendish’s distaste for the new women that appeared during the Interregnum. Although she clearly found the new social status for women troubling, I would suggest that beyond internalized misogyny, Cavendish was also dissatisfied with how vocal women could perpetuate stereotypes and therefore prolong any hope of cultural changes that would give women better access to education. The disconnect Cavendish experienced in Henrietta Maria’s court between self and performance and the exclusion she felt with her husband’s guests highlighted that she somehow needed to circumvent social and internalized prejudice about gender. Rather than achieving social power through manipulation of the Commonwealth social and political system, Cavendish believed women could and should only advance through “worth and merit” (True Relation 299).

For Cavendish, this meant women had to engage with intellectual disciplines that were traditionally male in order to achieve some level of equality. Liddy believes that “Cavendish was tired of women being disempowered through exclusion from political and military life” (136). She was aware of this social paradox that simultaneously denied women the opportunity to participate while claiming that the reason women never participated was because they were incapable of doing so. Women needed to reconstruct the narratives that dictated the nature of their sex in order to challenge patriarchal claims about women that limited their significance in society.

Cavendish had witnessed Henrietta Maria’s use of performance to recreate narratives of femininity. Furthermore, as a member of Henrietta Maria’s court, she was familiar with plays-texts circulating to serve a political purpose. The problem, then, was circumventing the sex of the
characters and the cultural predisposition to dictate how men and women behaved because of their biology.

The imaginary stage

*Poems and Fancies*, as established earlier, used woman’s purportedly ridiculous and vacuous nature as a way to legitimize Cavendish’s poetry. The opening “Epistle to Mistres [sic] Toppe” argued that women were naturally inclined to imagination and, by default, creative writing. In theatre, Tomlinson argues that Cavendish was “acutely conscious of ‘Fancy’s’ power to substitute the scene of the mind for the theatre of the world” (273). Another influential factor in her creation of the imaginary stage was the repositioning of text as an alternative or a replacement for live performance during the Interregnum. The actress that Cavendish witnessed in the role of a man, a performance so natural that she could easily have been male, inspired the development and interpretation of an imaginary stage that defied the limitations of the physical body.

Sylvia Browerbank notes that for Cavendish, “fancy predominates in women” (5). All of Cavendish’s creative writing, whether poems, short stories, novel, or plays, foregrounded the significance of the imaginary (or fanciful) process that was innate to her because she was a woman. While in exile and at court, Cavendish was still bound by societal conventions that prescribed feminine roles based on patriarchal laws, but the imagination was not only free from these regulations, it was also distinctly feminine. Creating an imaginary space for theatre removed the playhouse from the male-dominated public space to a feminine space. The imagination also removed physical boundaries from the performance, forcing the reader into the position of actor, requiring engagement with the text, and preventing traditional interpretations of
dramatic situations. Through print, Cavendish could manipulate the theatre, live performance, and audience response to create a specific, educational play/reader relationship that deconstructed gender conventions.

**Constructing the imaginary stage**

Later in her life, when defending her preference for social isolation, Cavendish wrote that “whatsoever is spoken, is Interpreted to the worst Sense” (*Sociable Letters* 78). Women in society, specifically, were allotted roles by men that forever placed them at a disadvantage. Cavendish noted that for a woman:

- if she be in Years, they will say, she is fitter for the Grave than Company, if
- Young, fitter for a School than Conversation, if of middle Years, their Tongues are the Fore-runners of her Decay, if she hath Wealth, and no titles, she is like Meat, all Fat and no Blood, and if great Title with small Wealth, they say, she is like a Pudding without Fat, and if she hath both Wealth and Title, they Shun her as the Plague….and if she hath neither Wealth nor Title, they Scorn her Company…. (*Sociable Letters* 79)

The existing double standards made it purposefully difficult for women to move beyond their roles. Their physical sex literally acted as a barrier to social and cultural advancement and men’s refusal to alter their interactions left both sexes at an impasse. The imaginary stage, however, had no physical bodies to prevent reinterpretations of gender roles. Furthermore, Cavendish could outline, explicitly, the goals of her dramatic work in order to ensure that her readers understood exactly how to engage with and understand the play texts.
Straznicky explains that “unlike her other writings, which are represented as the products of solitary contemplation put into circulation only to preserve the author’s fame, Cavendish’s drama is constructed as writing with social purpose” (“Reading the Stage” 373). Using dedicatory epistles and multiple ‘Notes to the Reader’ in Playes Cavendish carefully outlined the purpose and themes of her plays, explaining how her readers should engage with the texts and constructed a space that mimicked and rejected live performance for specific reasons.

The collection is dedicated “to those that do delight in Scenes and wit” (Cavendish, Playes, “The Dedication” A2). This dedication draws a parallel between Cavendish and the reader. She wanted a reader who was willing to engage intellectually with her writing. As playwright, Cavendish believed that the collection was for other readers who understood the point of the plays as educational and also fanciful. At the end of the dedication, she notes that while writing, “my brain the Stage, my thoughts were acting there” (Cavendish, Playes, “The Dedication” A2). Therefore, the reader is meant to understand that live performance is not a consideration for the texts they are reading. Instead, the plays are removed from the space, and the imaginary stage is identified as part of Cavendish’s authorial intent.

In fact, Cavendish claims repeatedly that her plays are not intended for the stage. Her “Dedicatory Epistle” to her husband states that she “sen[t] them forth to be printed, rather than keep them concealed in hopes to have them first Acted” because the plays are “dull dead statues” (Cavendish, Playes A3). In her second address to the reader, Cavendish argues that she is publishing her plays because she “knows not when they will be Acted” (Playes, “To the Reader [2]” A4). Cavendish’s use of ‘when’ in her address is interesting in that it suggests the possibility of performance. At the same time, however, this particular address to her readers simultaneously discusses the limitations of live performance. As Cavendish remarks, “it is very unlikely, or
indeed impossible to get a whole company of good Actors” who understand how to act and can learn their lines (Playes, “To the Readers [2]” A4). The debate over ‘good’ actors reveals Cavendish’s dissatisfaction with live performance, indicating that there were standards she viewed as necessary in order for a play to translate well to the stage.

Findlay notes that “a sense of place for Cavendish’s plays is complicated by the overlap between imaginary, domestic and professional stages alluded to in the scripts” and that Cavendish seems to write for or envision a “utopian professional theatre” that engaged with all three (54). Combining the different spaces for performance, as Findlay suggests, is similar to Cavendish’s re-envisioning of imagination and creativity as feminine. Her speculation about live performance in her prefaces might indicate she was considering the intersection of female and male spaces when constructing her narratives. Combined with the fact that many of her plays were focused on female characters suggests that she was considering how the female and male bodies functioned in performance. While Tomlinson does not believe “Cavendish’s plays were written for women actors,” she does note that there are “positive constructions of female performance feasible within the enclosure of her ‘Fancy-stage’” (276, 279). The ‘Fancy-stage’ placed the characters in the body of the reader, making the reader’s body, whether male or female, the intersecting point for Cavendish’s characters.

The intersecting point between reading her plays and constructing the imaginary space depended upon the reader’s interaction and engagement with the text. For Cavendish, acting “learn[ed]…graceful behaviours and demeanours” to those who engaged with plays (Playes, “To the Reader [4]”). In other words, acting was an educational tool that enabled actors to empathize

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38 Tomlinson’s analysis of Cavendish’s interpretation of actors and performance notes that Cavendish is speaking strictly of male performers in the preface. The masculine performance Cavendish discusses, however, is made “moot” because of the content of her plays that deal with female performance. See Tomlinson, 279.
with the characters in the text. Acting for “Mercenary profit,” however, was unacceptable because it was important to “not only strive to act well upon the stage, but to practice their actions when off from the stage” (Cavendish, *Playes*, “To the Reader [4]”). Distinguishing between the commercial theatre and performance as an educational tool makes the critical reader a significant component for Cavendish’s plays. The purpose of theatre, and of engaging with the play-text, was not about the performance, but about making the actor understand the reason for the acts in the play. Live theatre, however, involved spectatorship that rarely encouraged participation with the morals and arguments of plays, whereas reading the play enabled the readers to become actors through the text.  

Reading became a form of performance. Cavendish instructed that:

> Playes must be read to the nature of those several humours or passions, as are exprest by Writing: for they must not read a Scene as they read a Chapter; for Scenes must be read as they were Spoke or Acted. Indeed Comedies should be read a mimick way, and the sound of their voice must be according to the sense of the Scene; and as for Tragedies or Tragick Scenes they must not be read in a pueling whining Voice, but a sad serious Voice…. (*Playes*, “Untitled Preface”)

Reading had to mimic acting. As in live performance, the reader had to embody the characters and become an actor in order to understand and learn from Cavendish’s plays. If a “Play is well and skillfully read, the very sound of the voice that enters through the Ears, doth present the Actions to the Eyes of Fancy as lively as if it were really Acted” (Cavendish, *Playes*, “Untitled Preface” A4). The text, through active reading, became equivalent to a live performance but in the reader’s imagination. The action occurs visually in the mind’s eye, allowing the audience to

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39 ‘Reading’ plays could occur privately, in isolation, or exist as a communal and social act. See Straznicky, “Reading the Stage,” 381.
respond as though the events are live. The actors, however, are not limited to their physical bodies, which lets Cavendish subvert traditional expectations for male and female narratives. Therefore, reading served a specific purpose for Cavendish. By focusing on issues of gender in her plays, she aligned all of her readers with female characters whether their physical bodies were male or female.

Significantly, Cavendish tells her readers that she “does not keep strictly to the Masculine and Feminine Genders, as they call them” (Playes, “To the Reader [5]” A5). Within this address, she highlights that the ‘feminine,’ despite being viewed as innocent or virtuous, is predominantly associated with negative traits, while the ‘masculine’ is inherently positive. She writes, “so Love is the Masculine Gender, Hate the Feminine Gender, and the Furies are shees, and the Graces are shees, and the Virtues are shees, and the seven deadly Sins are shees” (Cavendish, Playes, “To the Reader [5]” A5). To be feminine means to embody paradoxically both the virtuous and the negative, while men are good and only good. In her own work, however, Cavendish argued that she could change these gender associations. She anticipated reconfiguring gendered behaviours as neutral would draw criticism from her audience because, if conventional gender associations are changed, “some will say…there would be no forms or rules of Speech to be understood by” (Cavendish, Playes, “To the Reader [5]” A5). Gender-bias was so deeply ingrained that Cavendish understood the need to redefine identities to create a bridge between the sexes. Her plays would force readers to redefine terminology for both sexes and therefore redefine what it meant to be male or female. Cavendish’s address challenges the expectation of gender-specific behaviour in her plays. She “renounce[s]” the structure that dictates these divisions, arguing that she “would rather [her] writings should be unread than be read by such Pedantical Sholastical [sic] persons” (Cavendish, Playes, “To the Reader [5]” A5).
Cavendish thus used her prefaces to outline how her readers should approach the text. She aligned her plays with an imaginary stage, emphasized theatre as educational and her readers as educated, positioned the reader as an actor required to engage with the play-texts, and, finally, argued she was challenging gender roles and gender-bias. The imaginary stage was constructed both in and through the reader. Examining *Love’s Adventures*, the first play in Cavendish’s collection, I will demonstrate how the play functioned on the imaginary stage.

**Love’s Adventures and gender-fluidity**

There are three separate narratives in *Love’s Adventures* that focus on different, and only distantly connected, women in specific circumstances: Lady Orphant, Lady Bashful, and Lady Ignorant. Batigelli believes that in her plays, “Cavendish juxtaposes heroines who differ from one another in the philosophical stance they take to their world; faced with similar problems, they respond very differently” (28). At the same time, by dividing her play into three separate plots and juxtaposing her characters, Cavendish could also pair a male and female figure together in order to better investigate issues of gender.

Liddy notes that “from the very first scene, the normal [gender] roles are reversed” (139). Rather than depicting a woman pressured into marriage, *Love’s Adventures* opens with Lord Singularity being pressured by his father into marriage with a child, Lady Orphant. Singularity’s refusal of marriage at the opening of the play changes him into the object of desire for Orphant years later. In order to know the man who refused marriage with her, Orphant disguises herself as the boy, Affectionata, and follows Singularity into war. The subversion of gender stereotypes

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40 Midway through *Love’s Adventures*, Lady Ignorant becomes Lady Ignorance. This is in keeping with Cavendish’s claims that she is depicting “general Follies, Vanities, Vices, Humours” in her plays (*Playes*, “To the Reader [3]” A4).
is primarily embodied by the cross-dressing Orphant. She is a “chastely honest” and rational woman who loves “not for the bodyes sake, but for the soules pure spirit” (Cavendish, *Love’s Adventures* I.vii. 33; I.v.31). Cavendish depicts a woman who is in complete control of her emotions, capable of rational debate and reasoning in direct opposition to popular seventeenth century stereotypes. Liddy further suggests that Orphant was a tool “to hypothesise on the nature of civil war” and that “[her] views additionally demonstrate that Early Modern women were capable of discussing such important issues [as war and peace]” (142-43). Orphant is thus an equal not only to Singularity, but also to the soldiers and politicians that she engages with.

The relationship between Singularity and Affectionata developed over the course of the play is primarily intellectual and emotional and unrelated to their physical bodies. Although the romance does not occur until Affectionata reveals herself as a woman, it is because of her “wit” that their relationship evolves (Cavendish, *Love’s Adventures* IV.xii.55). Liddy argues that “Affectionata is a contradiction in terms. As Affectionata, she constantly defers to Lord Singularity’s authority. As Lady Orphant, she has seized upon the opportunity… to pursue her own fate” (143). When playing Affectionata, Orphant becomes an androgynous figure uneasily aligned with either feminine or masculine ‘behaviour.’ At the revelation of her sex, she notes that “though [she] dissembled in [her] outward habit and behaviour…[she] was always chaste and modest in [her] nature” (Cavendish, *Second Part* V.xxxiii.103). The performance, then, exists only as a physical disguise and not as a change in character. Orphant’s character is not dependent on her sex but on her intelligence.

In the secondary plot, several suitors attempt to court the newly widowed and determinedly single Lady Bashful. One suitor in particular, Sir Serious Dumb, becomes infatuated by the socially awkward and terribly shy Bashful, and determines to win her hand in
marriage, competing with Sir Roger Exception for her hand. In Bashful’s narrative, Cavendish concerns herself with public speech and questions of social image constructed by men and women. Specifically, she examines two different forms of silence through Bashful and Serious Dumb: involuntary and voluntary. The fundamental issue with speech is not necessarily who is speaking, but how the audience or society engages with the speaker. Bashful’s shyness that makes it so she “cannot [speak with people] for stuttering” (Cavendish, Love’s Adventures I.iv.29). The heart of the problem, for Bashful, is that her reputation is repeatedly put at risk through socialization because she is unable to engage with public hypocrisy. Quite literally, Bashful’s identity is threatened by “spiteful tongues, which are worse than Divels” (Cavendish, Love’s Adventures III.xiii.41). Bashful argues that:

…mankind is worse natured than beasts, and beasts better natured than men; besides beasts looks not with censuring eyes, nor heares, or listens with inquisitive eares, nor speaks with detracting tongues, nor gives false judgement, or spitefull censures, or slandering reproaches, nor jeeres, nor laughs at innocent or harmless Errours, nor makes every little mistake a crime. (Cavendish, Love’s Adventures I.iv.28)

Where Orphant, disguised as a man, is accepted easily into society, Bashful, as a widow, becomes helpless against the overarching social order. Her words are continuously judged according to those around her and she remains unable to defend herself.

Women’s silence positions them in a state of powerlessness, but for men, it becomes an attractive trait. Cavendish makes it clear that Serious Dumb’s appeal as a suitor is his silence in contrast to the brash, overbearing Roger Exception. Reformer notices Serious Dumb because he “did not speak” (Cavendish, Love’s Adventures I.x.38). The role reversal on the benefits of
silence is particularly interesting because Cavendish frames the discussion through Bashful. The reader is invited into Bashful’s reflection on society, and her position within that society, while Serious Dumb communicates for most of the play through letters read aloud by women. Bashful’s speech provides insight into the problem of public silence and public speech. In contrast, Serious Dumb is significant because of his silence. When he first speaks to Bashful with his voice, he notes that he has no “rhetorick” but only “civil words,” she tells him that “rhetoric is rather for sound than sense, for words than reason” (Cavendish, *Second Part* II.x.73).

Although Orphant demonstrates strength in public oration over the course of the primary narrative, Bashful is critical of the worthless rhetoric that dominates society. Serious Dumb’s speech is spoken in the privacy of Bashful’s home. Private speech by men is therefore more significant than public rhetoric that perpetuates social isolation in women like Bashful.

While Orphant and Bashful represent higher virtues in women, Lady Ignorant demonstrates vices. Despite the new positions Cavendish constructed for other female characters, Ignorant’s narrative reaffirms a wife’s duty as “obedience, discretion and Housewifery” (Cavendish, *Second Part* II.xiv.82). The dilemma presented in Ignorant examines how vices are seen in men and women. Lady Ignorant convinces her husband, Sir Peaceable Studious, to leave his studies in order to develop a social life. The results are disastrous when he becomes lecherous and flirtatious, leaving Ignorant to suspect an affair. In the end, Peaceable Studious claims his behaviour stemmed from his anger at Ignorant’s unwillingness to accept his way of life:

> I confess you made me sad, to think that your humour could not sympathize with mine, as to walk in the same course of life as I did, but you were ignorant and would not believe me, until you had found experience by practice. (Cavendish, *Second Part* II.xiv.80)
Despite the reassertion of power between Peaceable Studious and Ignorant, including his claim that his actions were intended as a lesson, I find Cavendish’s tertiary plot particularly critical of double standards encountered by men and women in public.

Ignorant, for instance, repeatedly attempts to navigate her husband’s cruel behaviour with caution. During their first night out at a party, Peaceable Studious loses 500 pounds while gambling, much to his wife’s horror. Assuming Cavendish used the plot to investigate marriage and proper wifely behaviour, Ignorant’s repeated attempts to limit her husband’s gambling demonstrate a woman in a hopeless situation. When she warns him about losing his estate, he suggests that if they need to work, she “may play the Whore, and I the Shark” (Cavendish, *Love’s Adventures* II.xi.38). Ignorant even argues that a husband has an obligation to his wife to “direct and guide her” (Cavendish, *Love’s Adventures* II.xi.38). In other words, although by the end of the play it is Peaceable Studious who claims to have taught his wife a lesson, over the course of the play, it is Ignorant who attempts to guide and correct her husband. In fact, Peaceable Studious is the one who repeatedly acts immorally.

Significantly, after Peaceable Studious kisses his maid and flirts with two society women, Lady Amorous and Lady Wagtail, Ignorant asks, “why do you make love to the Ladies, since I suffer none to make love to me?” (Cavendish, *Love’s Adventures* IV.ixx.52). Peaceable Studious’s reply highlights the double standard between them: “Those actions are allowable and seemly, as manly in men, are condemned in women, as immodest, and unbecoming, and dishonourable” (Cavendish, *Love’s Adventures* IV.ixx.52-53). The end of Ignorant’s story, where Peaceable Studious reiterates the image of women as “tender, shiftless, and timorous creatures by their nature,” sets up an equal criticism of men’s behaviour. If women are not capable of their own morality without patriarchal guidance, then men are equally to blame for teaching
questionable behaviour. Ultimately, one fundamental problem Peaceable Studious reveals in society is that men do not “respect their wives” and therefore enable the questionable behaviour in women (Cavendish, Second Part II.xiv.81). While Ignorant is portrayed as foolish for bothering her husband’s study, Peaceable Studious’s narrative demonstrates that the frivolous behaviour seen in women can also be attributed to and may even be caused by men.

Together, the three plots of Love’s Adventures refocus seventeenth-century gender stereotypes, subverting the notion that particular virtues and vices are distinctly feminine or masculine. The behaviours of Orphant, Bashful, and Ignorant are not confined to their sex. The imaginary stage allowed their behaviour to transcend the live body and move naturally between male and female figures. Cavendish encourages the reader to engage with the individual characters in a way that encourages empathy and understanding. Learning that men and women behave in similar ways but that society treats them differently because of their sex would help the reader apply the knowledge off-stage and in real life.

Conclusion

Gender bias in the early modern period was dependent on constructing an inferior other to ensure male dominance. While Cavendish’s Playes are not strictly ‘feminist’ from a contemporary perspective, she did clearly attempt to address societal assumptions and constructions relating specifically to gender and, more significantly, to sex-based constructs. Cavendish needed her readers to relate to her characters. Her aim was to remove reader biases in order to change day-to-day prejudice that constrained men and women in society. By aligning her writing ambition with feminine ‘fancy,’ Cavendish distanced her creativity from the patriarchal structure of the society in which she lived. She embraced drama as a way to educate
her readers and change their internalized perceptions about men and women. Through print, Cavendish controlled the message of her plays. At the same time, her preference for an imaginary space over live theatre effectively removed the problem of the physical body. Cavendish’s personal experiences as a woman, including limited education, cultural double standards, and social interactions dictated by her sex, left her frustrated. Cavendish wanted her readers to experience the inherent problems gender roles created in society and how they served to undermine true virtues in order to inspire change.
CHAPTER 3

“THE INDISPENSABLE PEN PERFORMER”:

DJUNA BARNES AND METATHEATRICAL PRINT

In an early interview, “Lou Tellegen on Morals and Things” (1914), Djuna Barnes constructed a “one-act encounter,” complete with stage directions (Barnes, “Lou Tellegen” 153). “At the rise of the curtain,” Barnes wrote, “there is discovered the indispensable Pen Performer, an interviewer from a down-town journal” (“Lou Tellegen” 153). Barnes’s self-identification as ‘pen performer’ represents an important framework for understanding her relationship with print and publication, using print as a performance space for social commentary. When she adopted the role of pen performer, she integrated her position—interviewer—with the performance of the interview. By combining the fictive ‘pen performer’ with her actual role as journalist, Barnes constructed a metatheatrical performance that commented on the nature of celebrity, performance, fiction, and reality that in turn reflected the culture of her readers. This commentary functioned to reframe the act of interviewing within a fictional narrative that challenged how readers interpreted and engaged with the genre. At one point, the Pen Performer and the popular actor Tellegen discuss “the hypocrisy of interviewing” (Barnes “Lou Tellegen” 156). During the following exchange, Barnes revealed the fallacy of the interview:

LOU TELLEGEN. But that’s where you’re wrong again. There is no such thing as hypocrisy. You ask questions I’m not supposed to answer, and then I answer them as I’m not supposed to do.

PEN PERFORMER (with a sigh that indicates patience). That’s not exactly the
point, you see. If interviews were like that, it would turn out all right. But the interviewer never asks what he wants to, because he never gets the real truth.

LOU TELLEGEN. I assure you, mademoiselle, I am perfectly truthful.

PEN PERFORMNER. Excellent! Excellent! Tell me what kind of man you are offstage. (Barnes, “Lou Tellegen” 156)

This exchange highlights the inherent problem with the interview as a genre—namely that the interview is literally a construction of both the interviewer and the interviewee. Tellegen is never off-stage. Rather, he is performing his celebrity persona for Barnes. The Pen Performer, acting as interviewer, can only construct the interview on the performance of Tellegen and can never actually question the real Tellegen, making the act of interviewing irrelevant. Barnes’s ‘pen performer’ role served to interrogate the interview genre, removing the reality of the situation to present the truth of the fictional performance. Daniela Caselli argues that in Barnes’s interviews, “the emphasis on the theatricality of life is both a comment on her subjects…and a way to acknowledge the intrinsic theatricality of the genre of the interview” (21). Interviews became dramatic or theatrical representations of the act of interviewing, creating metacommentary that was critical not only of the interview process, but also the society that accepted the interview as true or ‘real.’

The role of pen performer and the performative interrogation of genre can be used as a framework to understand Barnes’s writing. In his forward to *Djuna Barnes: Interviews*, Douglas Messerli observes that in her early interviews, there appeared “nearly all [of] Barnes’s major literary themes,” including questions of cultural framework, gender, sexuality, and performance (3). The Pen Performer existed as a third-person observer that kept Barnes the writer separate
from her writing. This distance gave her the space to comment on issues that concerned her. At the same time, the Pen Performer separated readers from Barnes by existing as an abstract literary figure. Using the pen performer identity gave Barnes the space to construct pointed commentary.

In her dramatic work, however, Barnes’s purposeful distancing made her plays difficult to understand for conventional audiences. Susan F. Clark notes that “Barnes is rarely associated with the theatre in America” even though from 1916 to 1929 she wrote and published a variety of one-act plays (105). Furthermore, she was an active member of the little theatre group the Provincetown Players, where she had three plays produced: Three from the Earth (1919), Kurzy of the Sea (1920), and An Irish Triangle (1920). Still, Barnes’s dramatic writing remains largely ignored in modern theatre studies. Only a couple of her plays, written after her time with the Provincetown Players, have been professionally produced, including The Dove (1923) and her full-length play The Antiphon (1958). While Julie Taylor argues that Barnes’s literary fiction “has played a disproportionately significant role in the reconceptualising of modernism that has taken place in the last thirty years” (3), Barnes’s drama is repeatedly viewed as an artistic failure. Joan Retallack calls Barnes’s participation in theatre a creative “misalliance,” while Diane Warren describes the one-act plays as “the least successful of her works” (52; 14). Her interest in adapting traditional narratives, like interviews, to comment on society strongly influenced her dramatic style. While it made Barnes’s work distinctive, it also made her plays more challenging. She made her dramatic structure and her dramatic techniques, such as stage directions and dialogue, inaccessible by reworking expected theatrical conventions to comment not only on the theatrical form, but also on theatre audiences.
Barnes’s unperformed plays are not easily located within the modernist theatre categories of theatrical and anti-theatrical work. In his discussion of anti-theatricality in the twentieth century, Martin Puchner warns that the relationship between theatricality and anti-theatricality is not monolithic. Instead, anti-theatricality is “a variety of attitudes through which the theater is being kept at arm’s length and, in the process of resistance, utterly transform[ed]” (2). In turn, Puchner identifies “(pro)theatricalism” as the modernist counterpart to antitheatricality (2). Thus, both pro- and anti-theatricalism are “tool[s] for analyzing a variety of positions and phenomena that…are…variously intertwined and interconnected” in the context of modernist theatre (Puchner 2). Barnes’s one-acts resist both pro-theatrical and anti-theatrical labels, which makes them difficult to position in relation to her modernist peers. The solution to labelling Barnes as a dramatist is virtually non-existent. While extensive publication and a lack of performance history suggest the plays can be interpreted as intended for reading in the tradition of closet drama, Andrew Field describes Barnes’s one-acts as “more like sketches than closet-dramas” because of their brevity (90). Most of her published plays are unusually short dialogues between two, three, or four characters with very little or no action. Retallack complains that Barnes “seems often to have extended herself just at the point when the ‘drama’ begins” (49), but this complaint ignores how brevity serves the complexity of plot, character, and text.

In his book *Djuna Barnes*, James B. Scott observes that, whether published or performed, reviews of Barnes’s plays label them as “‘impenetrable,’ as ‘unactable,’ and even as written in ‘reprisal’ against an innocent audience which the plays defy it to understand” (51). All of her unperformed one-acts were created to challenge already challenging interpretations of theatre, performance, and print by subverting drama and print to reframe and recreate dominant heteronormative and patriarchal narratives. The complexity of Barnes’s dramatic writing
distanced her readers by twisting recognizable tropes into something unrecognizable. At the same time, her interest in reworking tropes and challenging her audience positions Barnes’s work in the modernist style of reinterpreting and reinventing traditional, mainstream narratives and creative forms.

This chapter will examine how Barnes’s subversion of labels served her political and artistic ideology. Her ‘pen performer’ role removed her from society in order to comment, reflect, and engage with her audience and readership. In this chapter, I will argue that Barnes’s dramatic works occupied a difficult space alongside other modernist dramatists, somewhere between theatrical and anti-theatrical, between print and performance in order to construct a metatheatrical social and artistic commentary. Using three of her plays, *Three from the Earth*, *Madame Collects Herself* (1918), and *To the Dogs* (1923), I will examine how Barnes intervenes in both live performance and print culture to create metatheatrical print.

**Print, performance, and modernism**

Understanding Barnes’s subversion of print and performance to create metacommentary requires an examination of the cultural shift in the United States that blurred the lines between publication and performance. Modernism was a cultural shift away from the Victorian values of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernist art, literature, and theatre attempted to “enter into a sort of conversation with the art of the past” in order to reframe and reinvent social narratives that better reflected new social realities (Lewis 27). Gender and sexuality, as they related to women, were significant cultural roles that were being challenged in this era.

The “Woman question” of the late Victorian and Edwardian period and the emergence of feminism were represented through creative interrogations of women’s social, economic, and
political status. Women writers embraced modernism’s artistic interest in challenging cultural norms and artistic conventions that continued to systematically marginalize them. According to Penny Farfan:

feminist artists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries engaged with the texts of the culture at large through their relationships to the texts of the theatre, so that their responses to dramatic literature and theatrical practice in effect constituted feminist critical discourse both through theatre and about theatre itself. (Women, Modernism, and Performance 2)

Print and publication served the same purpose. Monika Faltejskova notes that “by 1910, the sphere of literature was widely understood as dominated by women and women’s issues, and as such, was considered effeminate” (21). Thus, literary and theatrical avenues opened by modernist ideology, specifically the rejection of ‘traditional’ and ‘dominant’ culture, benefitted women’s reimagining of gender and sexuality.

Existing as a modernist counterculture meant creating alternative space to present and confront dominant narratives. In the United States, the push against dominant cultural narratives was constrained by the lack of space for non-dominant artistic figures to publish and produce their work. The evolution of little magazines and little theatres helped cultivate a space for the emerging subculture. Little magazines were “non-commercial enterprises founded by individuals or small groups intent upon publishing the experimental works of untried, unpopular, or underrepresented [American] writers” (Churchill and McKible 4). Usually, the content of these publications “def[ied] mainstream tastes and conventions” while challenging “conventional political wisdom and practice” (Churchill and McKible 4-5). Little theatres functioned in the same way, creating a non-commercial space that was specifically interested in cultivating new
works by American playwrights. Puchner argues that “small theatres [were] the driving force behind most of the turn-of-the-century reforms” in theatre (20). For Puchner, these ‘small’ theatres represented “economic pressures… [and]…a deliberate retreat from a mass public into an intimate space” (20). Little magazines and little theatres were interconnected artistic endeavours used and supported by the various artists that wrote, published, produced, and performed modernist work. The overlap between alternative publications and alternative performance spaces meant that a small, specific, and like-minded audience/readership emerged.

Barnes was part of the modernist coterie growing out of and inspired by the liberating work of little magazines and theatres. She lived in the heart of the modernist, bohemian culture in Greenwich Village, New York from 1913 to 1922. There, she quickly became an active member of the artistic community, publishing in little magazines such as The Little Review and The Others, and joining the little theatre company the Provincetown Players. Cheryl Black describes the culture of Greenwich Village as a place where “theatres and the magazines that reviewed them were ‘little,’ verse and love were ‘free,’ and everything else was ‘new,’ especially women” (8). In fact, women in Greenwich Village embraced feminism and wielded their writing and artwork to further feminist causes. Many of Barnes’s “associates and affiliates at the Provincetown Players” were heavily involved with radical feminism and their work advanced new gender roles and perspectives (Clark 110). Barnes was no stranger to engaging with the new cultural politics of women and femininity. Not only had her grandmother been “an outspoken supporter for women’s rights (including the right to sexual freedom),” but Barnes’s early journalism was particularly concerned with women’s social positions (Clark 107). In her 1914 article “How it Feels to be Forcibly Fed,” she underwent forcible feeding as experienced by British suffragists, and Nick Salvato has suggested that Barnes’s article “The Girl and the
“Gorilla” is actually a commentary on suffragism, and that “both the gorilla and the political activists are prisoners of male will” (145). Barnes, however, “avoided political labels,” preferring to distance herself from specific causes (Black 23). The political separation she cultivated became part of her artistic identity, allowing her to maintain a critical distance in order to better subvert dominant discourse.

Barnes’s rejection of political and ideological labels is an important component to understanding her dramatic writing. The fact that most of Barnes’s dramatic writing occurred while she lived in Greenwich Village suggests that her non-conformist stance was informed by her experiences within the modernist community. Although Greenwich Village was central to modernist ideology, and in particular, feminism, there existed fundamental hypocrisies in the movement. Brenda Murphy warns that, when considering significant members of the Bohemian Greenwich Village community “it must be remembered that most of these people had upper-middle-class origins” (39). Within the push against traditional ideology, there existed constant backlash against new cultural values; a refusal to reject certain traditional values that privileged select groups, including whites, males, and heterosexuals. Barnes, a woman who had to use her journalism as “a means of maintaining herself,” and who was not strictly heterosexual, existed just outside the privileged group (Benstock 237). Her socio-economic status, gender, and queer sexuality made her conscious of the limitations of new ideologies that, while attempting to challenge tradition, perpetually reaffirmed the status-quo.

Some of the internal conflicts between the old and new values can be examined through Barnes’s time with the Provincetown Players, starting in 1916. According to Robert Karoly Solas, the Provincetown Players “as a group…questioned the premises upon which the American show business rested” and “actively challenged universal assumptions still made about the social
role and function of artistic creativity, imagination, and ideas” (1). Instead of pursuing ‘professional’ theatrical performance, the Provincetown Players were primarily concerned with smaller, more intimate productions that resonated with the new culture of the early twentieth century. These productions included controversial and edgy content and new technical achievements. For women, the Provincetown Players offered more opportunities in all areas of theatre because of its unconventional non-hierarchal business structure and its interest in new, challenging, and specifically ‘American’ plays. Women occupied new positions within the group that enabled access to the creative space as playwrights, directors, and designers. Black believes “that roughly half of Provincetown’s members were women and [furthermore] that a considerable number were feminists,” thus explaining “why so many plays by women were accepted for production” early in the group’s history (52). Over the course of the company’s existence, however, the influence of, and opportunities for, women slowly declined. Part of this decline was caused by infighting that forced out some members, and repositioned others. Another part of the cultural shift was a growing backlash against feminist plays and feminist discourse, within the organization and among the audience and subscribers.

Initially, the new narratives women constructed for the theatre were readily accepted, as were women’s positions and status as part of the Provincetown management. One of the most prominent women in the organization, Susan Glaspell, was also one of the leading playwrights. Her first play, Trifles, produced in 1916, dramatizes the story of Mrs. Minnie Wright, who murders her abusive husband after he kills her pet canary. Telling the play from the perspective of two women examining the ‘trifles’ in the house after the murder, Glaspell “contrast[ed] male and female perspectives” about the ideas of significance in piecing together the events that led up to the murder (Barlow, Plays by American Women xx). Judith Barlow explains that “while men
look[ed] for overt, shocking evidence of motive; the women notice[d] [Mrs. Wright’s] despair in the uneven stitching on a quilt” (Plays by American Women xx). Glaspell’s play represented stylistic choices and gender perspectives echoed by other Provincetown women playwrights such as Rita Creighton Smith, Mary Foster Barber, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. According to Black, women playwrights in Provincetown “mix[ed] stylistic features, combining realistic dialogue, domestic interiors, and symbolic, expressionistic, or surreal undercurrents” in order to emphasize and investigate feminist perspectives and question conventional ideas about gender and sexuality (57). Unfortunately, as conventional hierarchies, such as patriarchal power dynamics, reasserted themselves, women were progressively marginalized in the group.

This marginalization was caused by what Black describes as “radical changes” during the 1919-1920 season, which included the departure of several women in positions of power, technical advancements, a shift away from one-act plays, and, significantly, the commercial success of two of Eugene O’Neill’s plays (60-61). Refocusing the company on commercially viable plays, such as O’Neill’s, effectively limited women playwrights who wished to challenge conventional gender roles. Black theorizes that while “subscription audiences had evidently supported plays that were artistically innovative and politically controversial, and were perhaps unusually sympathetic to plays with feminist themes, the wider appeal of such plays was doubtful” (61). Thus, while the Provincetown Players started as a space to interrogate patriarchal culture, the confines of that culture eventually extinguished any political progress.

Barnes’s contributions to and participation in the group lasted until 1922, through the ideological and structural shifts discussed above. It is therefore likely that Barnes was aware of inherent problems relating to the stagnation of specific ideologies when forced to conform to accepted methodologies of artistic critique. Cheryl J. Plumb points out that Barnes’s early work
“satirizes middle-class values and beliefs,” revealing critical and scathing cultural insight (17).

Reflecting on her time with Provincetown, Barnes wrote:

So we talked, so we went our separate ways home, there to write out of that confusion which is biography when it is wedded to fact, confession and fancy in any assembly of friend versus friend and still friends. Of such things, were our plays made. (“The Days of Jig Cook” 32)

Conflict was central to creating Provincetown theatre. In particular, Barnes was conscious that underlying the relationships she formed there was constant disagreement. The alternative space provided to reframe dramatic convention was ultimately flawed in the same way bohemian society was inherently flawed. Internal strife, often related to ideological differences, led inevitably to disintegration within the group. Attempting to maintain specific identities, such as feminist, or ‘little,’ failed once these identities aligned themselves, in any way, shape, or form with the overriding culture.

Within all of Barnes’s dramatic works, performed and unperformed, dominant conventions were purposefully challenged, if not outright rejected. Although the entire purpose of the Provincetown Players was to push dramatic conventions, Ann Larabee argues that Barnes “went beyond any of her contemporaries in her interrogation of theatrical form, finally questioning the whole notion of display and spectacle and her audience’s implicit voyeurism” (37). By removing familiar dramatic expectations, Barnes could successfully prevent her plays from becoming aligned with or subsumed by the culture she was commenting on. Instead, she attempted to interrupt any artistic conventions of the dramatic genre in print and performance. But understanding Barnes’s metatheatrical print also requires examining her plays in performance that was equally alienating from theatrical traditions. I am using ‘alienation’ in its
Brechtian sense; Elin Diamond explains that alienation is “the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh” (45). Barnes’s dramatic work differed from those of her peers at Provincetown because she was interested in commenting on the systemic flaws that made progress continually revert to acceptable ‘norms.’ By reinterpreting performance so that her plays were neither performance-oriented nor print-based, she could interrupt audience and readership’s experiences in order to reinvent their relationship to genres. Barnes used publication and dramatic form to actively alienate her dramatic genre from the dominant form. By doing this, Barnes avoided the issue faced by her peers: the eventual allegiance with, and interpretation by, cultural discourse based on dominant values.

*Three from the Earth* and interchangeable literary and theatrical space

*Three from the Earth* follows the three Carson brothers, Henry, James, and the youngest, John, as they meet with their father’s former mistress Kate Morley under the pretense of retrieving their father’s illicit correspondence from her. Over the course of the play, however, it is revealed that the brothers have an ulterior motive: they are attempting to convince Kate to acknowledge John as her son, the result of an affair with their father. Short, poetic, and clever, *Three from the Earth* was Barnes’s first play with the Provincetown Players. After the play’s production on October 31, 1919, it appeared in the November issue of the little magazine *The Little Review*.

Although well-received, the play inspired confusion in its audience. Alexander Woollcott in his article “Second Thoughts on First Nights: the Provincetown Plays Free from the Birth” called Barnes “the cryptic author,” stating that “the greatest indoor sport this week is guessing
[what her play] means” (XX2). While the plot of Three from the Earth was straightforward, the actual point of the play was buried in dialogue, in the play imagery, and in the characterization. Plumb argues that Barnes wanted “the audience [to] give in to the process of re-forming expectations and opinions” by constructing plays that destroyed conventions through subtle narrative variations (35). In midst of live performance, however, the intricacies of her style were difficult for the audience to analyze. Mary Lynn Broe argues that “Barnes’s elaborately detailed commentaries for stage set and her meticulous playwrights’ directions sabotage public and participatory aspects of the [dramatic] form” (26). Her plays combined stage directions and character descriptions to serve her social commentary but distanced the audience from the play in the process.

In Three from the Earth, for instance, the point of the play is expressed by John. His description of the brothers’ day-to-day lives—that they “go down on the earth and find things, tear them up, shaking the dirt off”—is the point of their visit; they have come to get the truth about Kate’s relationship to John and John’s father (Barnes, Three from the Earth 73). In order to understand the actual narrative of the play, that Kate’s normalcy and morality is suspect, the audience is forced to read the subtext and inferences in the dialogue. Kate’s description as a “handsome woman” is in sharp contrast to the brothers who “have a look formidable grossness and stupidity” (Barnes, Three from the Earth 70). The stark visual representation of ‘normalcy’ juxtaposed against the ugliness implies an important dichotomy between the characters, with Kate serving as the audience’s gateway into understanding the strange brothers. Structurally, Kate, who is “used to…the pleasure of exerting her will,” gleans significant plot information from the brothers about their life and the reason for their visit (Barnes, Three from the Earth 70).
The audience is invited to view the brothers from Kate’s perspective, a point of view that quickly turns sour.

Kate’s self-possession in the face of the brothers is undermined early in the play when she learns they know, at least in part, about her relationship with their father. As her discomfort grows and the power shifts from Kate to the brothers, the audience becomes aware that nothing is quite as it appears. For instance, Kate rants viciously against the brothers’ father. Her rant ends with her commenting off-handedly, “Why, great God, I might be the mother of one of you,” to which John replies, “significantly[:] So I believe, madam” (Barnes, Three from the Earth 76). The exchanges between Kate and the brothers almost always return to John, the brother with the “nicest hands;” a small detail that ultimately reveals Kate as his mother (Barnes, Three from the Earth 74). The revelation comes from a picture of Kate as the Madonna holding a baby with “nice hands” (Barnes, Three from the Earth 77). Highlighting the virgin/whore dichotomy that underpins the history between the three brothers, their father, and Kate is the dead mother of the eldest brothers, “a prostitute” (Barnes, Three from the Earth, 71). Although Kate repeatedly condemns those around her, it is her own behaviour that is morally dubious, a fact that culminates in the last part of the play. In the final moment, John kisses Kate despite her protests. To her repeated cries of “not that way,” John’s brother proclaims, “That’s the way you bore him!” (Barnes, Three from the Earth, 80). The implication in the last line is even more disturbing: that the relationship between Kate and the father was more than an affair between two strangers and that John was the result of incest. Kate is no longer a Madonna-esque figure of morality and whatever pretence she held is stripped away by John’s kiss. The audience is left trying to reframe the events of the play with the new information, finding themselves complicit in Kate’s past behaviour by witnessing and interpreting the unfolding narrative.
Field describes Barnes as a “special sort of dramatist, one capable of effects denied to more straightforward dramatists but by that very fact incapable of evoking universal involvement in an audience” (90). Barnes was particularly interested in forcing new perspectives by removing the accessible conventions that made an audience complacent. Kate’s criticisms—her rants against the brothers and their father—could exist as valid criticisms until the final twist that reveals the truth. In that instant, Kate becomes an unrecognizable figure and the audience is left to sort through the inferences in the play that led to the climax. Woollcott described the experience: “the spectators sit with bated breath listening to each word of a playlet of which the darkly suggested clues leave the mystery unsolved” (XX2). The length of the play effectively removed any satisfaction of a proper or ‘acceptable’ conclusion by interrupting the reveal of Kate as John’s mother and the darker implications of her relationship with John’s father. Instead, the play ends.

In print, the play was similarly obscure. Matthew Bodenheim’s review of the publication claimed that it had “the piquant sensitiveness of mud, in spots, and a lordly growsoneness [sic] in other passages; but on the whole its last sentence expresses my reaction—‘That’s the way you bore him’” (73). Bodenheim took particular issue with the juxtaposition of the brothers’ intelligence with their appearance. He argued that “Nietsche [sic], Schopenhauer, and deliberate naivete do not blend into small eyes and stupid faces” (Bodenheim 73). Barnes’s decision to depict intelligence in ugly outsiders while using the attractive and worldly Kate to represent immorality and dishonesty made Bodenheim uncomfortable. Salvato argues that a “crucial aspect of Barnes’s writing” is that “it disorients [the audience] not just because of the contortions and convolutions of her style but because of the discomforting ideas...that her stylistic intricacies force [the audience] to confront” (141). Print allowed Barnes to be specific with character
descriptions in order to ensure her readers were aware of the specific performance details that served her social commentary.

Both in print and in performance Barnes’s work left her readers uncomfortable: uncertain about what they had just witnessed or read and, subsequently, what that discomfiture meant for them as individuals. The need for quick and critical engagement in the midst of live performance made it difficult to understand the minute details that turned the play from an exercise in the traditional one-act narrative with beginning, middle, and end, into an interrogation of the traditional forms of performance and play-text. The interrogation purposefully alienated her audience. When published, the details available to the reader through stage directions and description further complicated the reader’s expectations because they accentuated details that could not easily translate into performance. The purpose of Barnes’s dramatic imagery in print served to enhance the reading experience and undermine dramatic conventions. In performance, the inability to translate small details into production made the simplicity of the play that much more complex because the audience could only infer the meaning, and by doing so, became part of the play’s construction. If the audience created the meaning, then the meaning reflected the audience culture: patriarchal, immoral, and sexually deviant.

**Play-texts as meta-theatrical print**

Barnes’s manipulation of dramatic and literary conventions required the audience to analyze live performance through a literary lens. As texts, Barnes’s plays introduced a similar problem as they required the reader to engage with performance elements, such as stage directions, in the text. When considered alongside her Provincetown plays, Barnes’s unperformed one-acts anticipate being read as performance-oriented texts and take advantage of
dramatic and theatrical conventions to interrupt and change the narratives. Barnes’s published plays are not necessarily separate from performance. Instead, in publication, her plays continued to challenge theatrical conventions by refusing to exist as either performance-oriented texts or anti-theatrical plays. Two plays problematize the idea of a division between theatrical and anti-theatrical: *Madame Collects Herself* and *To the Dogs*.

*Madame Collects Herself* was published in June 1918, in the little magazine *Parisienne*, one year before *Three from the Earth* was produced by the Provincetown Players. In the play, Madame Zolbo, a woman who collects pieces of her lovers to build her own body, goes to see her barber Monsieur Goujon to get a manicure and her hair styled. Learning that Zolbo is still collecting body parts from other men, Goujon, who has been having an affair with her, orders his wife and assistant to take her apart in a fit of anger. Reduced to her true form, “a blond canary,” Zolbo is caged and placed “beneath [Goujon’s] sign so that the world may see how [he], Monsieur the barber, revenges himself” (Barnes, *Madame* 65). Zolbo’s destruction, however, is not permanent. By the end of the play, “the bird’s the Madame again—she grows larger and larger every minute,” killing men and once again ‘collecting’ herself (Barnes, *Madame* 66).

The play responds directly to the idea “that a woman is only what a man, or men, make her” (Barnes, *Madame* 62). Zolbo is not the sum of her lover’s parts and Goujon has underestimated Zolbo as an individual. While the play seems to represent the power struggle between Goujon and Zolbo, the reality is that the barber never has any power over his customer. As a barber, Goujon’s role is to fashion his customer’s appearance, making himself part of Zolbo’s creation. At the same time, however, while Goujon gives the order to “kill” her, the act can only be accomplished by Goujon’s wife and assistant (Barnes, *Madame* 64). It is “a woman’s job” to destroy Zolbo (Barnes, *Madame* 64-65). Because Goujon has given her his heart, he is
powerless against her and his claim that the canary represents his “revenge” is a lie. Goujon literally fashions his masculine identity out of the actions of his wife and assistant. The humorous conclusion of the play, when Goujon “resigned[ly]” tells his assistant to “heat the irons” in preparation for Zolbo’s return, highlights Goujon’s status (Barnes Madame 66). He exists to serve Zolbo.

The interplay between Goujon and Zolbo forms the heart of the play, but the imagery Barnes uses is equally significant. In particular, the image of “Madame Zolbo disappear[ing] and a blond canary ris[ing] up toward the ceiling” is striking (Barnes, Madame 65). Larabee argues that in Barnes’s plays, “the theatrical problems inherent in using animals theatrically become philosophically important” (41). The canary symbol can easily be recalled from Glaspell’s Trifles, wherein the strangled caged bird motif suggests Mrs. Wright’s victimization at the hands of her husband, but whereas Glaspell’s play used the imagery of a murdered caged bird as an investigation into domestic abuse and powerlessness, Barnes reworks the imagery to mirror that of the phoenix rising from the ashes and so change the power dynamic. Zolbo cannot be caged and, even if she is truly a caged bird, she is still powerful.

In Madame Collects Herself, the imagery is equal to the dialogue. Retallack believes that Barnes’s stage directions “sabotage the [dramatic] form itself since they are impossible to execute onstage” (50). The point of Barnes’s complicated stage directions, however, is to serve the play in print form. Madame Collects Herself deliberately adheres to Retallack’s complaint.

Lulu and Fifine slowly remove the golden puffs belonging to Michael the poet; they cut off Pfiffing’s finger, next they strip the skin of the Baron away, and making a neat incision in her wrist draw one pint of blood—that pint donated by Conrad the anarchist…. (Barnes, Madame 65)
Barnes constructs the performance, purposefully recalling what Zolbo was in order to juxtapose what she becomes. She catalogues each lover that Zolbo stole her parts from. The image is symbolically significant in that it is two women stripping another of her body, reducing her under the orders of a man. Puchner explains that modern stage directions “mediate[], describe[], prescribe[], and interrupt[] the mimetic space of the theater” (21). *Madame Collects Herself* is about the imagery which serves to reconfigure questions of women’s identities in relationship to men. Women are the active characters. Lulu and Fifine strip Zolbo while Goujon watches, and Zolbo has the ability to recreate herself. The repositioning of power from men to women is a significant component of Barnes’s plays and occurs in a similar fashion in *To the Dogs*.

*To the Dogs* uses the same descriptive techniques in order to challenge patriarchal expectations of women. The play follows Gheid Storm’s attempt to initiate a sexual encounter with his neighbour Helena Hucksteppe only to be rebuffed. At the opening of the play, Helena “stands almost back view to the audience,” as Storm “vaults the window sill” (Barnes, *To the Dogs* 135). This image repeats at the end of the play when Helena “takes [up] her old position, her back almost square to the audience” (146). Farfan notes that “the action of the play is framed by the female character Helena Hucksteppe posing with her back to the audience” (“Women’s modernism and performance” 53), thus repositioning the focus onto Storm, while keeping Helena at an inaccessible distance. By positioning Helena’s back to the audience Barnes is denying the male gaze of Storm, but also the conventional gaze of the audience. Helena challenges the expectations of the audience when she is not in “the least astonished” at Storm’s entrance through the window (Barnes, *To the Dogs* 136). Her behaviour gives no indication of her character, making her unknowable.
Eventually, the play reveals that Storm, like the audience, knows nothing about Helena. The reader is placed in the same position as Storm. Structurally, the reader ‘knows’ her from Storm’s commentary:

I’ve watched your back: ‘There goes a fine woman, a fine silent woman; she wears long skirts, but she knows how to move her feet without kicking up dust—a woman who can do that, drives a man mad.’ In town there’s a story that you come through once every spring driving a different man ahead of you with a riding whip…. (Barnes, To the Dogs 136)

The stories Storm recounts are little more than gossip, however, images constructed by others who are equally unfamiliar with Helena. The more Storm tries to make Helena identify or align with the fictional, deviant, forceful figure of his fantasies, the more he becomes the focus of the play. Helena turns her gaze on Storm. As she destroys his notions of conquest, she asks, “In the study of science, is the scientist angry when the fly possesses no amusing phenomena,” making clear that it is Storm who is the subject of observation and not herself (Barnes, To the Dogs 141). While Storm claims to know Helena, he has only seen her back. By coming to her, though, he has become the subject of the female gaze.

Farfan suggests that Helena’s disinterest and ‘queerness’ “is analogous with the play’s impenetrability if conventional (hetero-normative) expectations of dramatic form” are not abandoned (“Women’s modernism and performance” 54). The anticipated sexual conquest not only fails, but Helena steadily deconstructs Storm’s character and his confidence. Storm’s inability to connect with Helena is because he expects her to conform to his desires. He tries repeatedly to explain and excuse her disinterest, culminating in his expression of discomfort. STORM. I’m uncomfortable--
HELENA. Uncomfortable!

STORM. [beginning to be really uncomfortable] Who are you?

HELENA. I am a woman, Gheid Storm, who is not in need.

STORM. You’re horrible! (Barnes, To the Dogs 142)

His frustration rises out of his expectations of her behaviour. Storm is looking for engagement, or, more crudely, for action, but Helena refuses to participate. In the play, Storm’s “vaulting” of the windowsill initiates the action by trespassing, but his act is interrupted because Helena will not accept the role constructed for her and let the action continue to its anticipated conclusion.

What Helena sees when she looks at Storm, and what Barnes’s readers are forced to confront, is that Storm is a pitiable figure. When he exclaims in anger, “the world allows a man his own thoughts,” Helena astutely notes that “not one [of his thoughts is his own], so far” (Barnes, To the Dogs 143). Instead, Storm exists as an extension of society, expecting the exchange to play out the way it always does. In her 1929 article “The Dear Dead Days,” Barnes mused: “we are horrified, legitimately and historically so, when we see a young girl going against convention and in the going suffering neither remorse, rich increase, pleasure in ‘falling,’ nor advancement” (43). Her observation of the visceral reaction experienced by the audience towards an ‘immoral’ woman who refuses regret and avoids cultural punishments can easily be seen in Helena’s character. She disturbs Storm, and by default, the reader, because she is unconcerned about the position the audience and Storm have given her. Barnes used Helena to deconstruct cultural expectations of women. While Helena notes that “the fall is almost here,” anticipating how To the Dogs should end according to convention, Barnes refuses to depict any consequences for her (Barnes, To the Dogs 145). The brevity of the play prevents her fall and leaves Barnes’s readers waiting.
Whereas Retallack believes that nothing happens in *To the Dogs*, I agree with Farfan who argues that Barnes’s “refusal of those conventions *is* the metatheatrical action of her play” (“Women’s modernism, and performance” 54). The form of the play, its brevity, the specificity of the stage directions, and the limits placed on Storm’s perceptions of Helena prevent the fallen woman narrative anticipated by the premise of the play. While the audience may expect the play to follow either Storm’s triumph or Helena’s defeat, Barnes does not allow the story to satisfy such expectations. Without the ‘proper’ resolution, the play depicts an awkward exchange that critiques the audience expectation that Storm should have a sexual encounter or that Helena cares about either Storm’s advances or the consequences for her sexual liberty.

In print, Barnes’s specificity of language and stage directions encouraged her readers to visualize the placement of the physical body onstage and understand how the movement and positions of the characters inform the plot. Barnes’s unperformed one-acts used imagery associated with live performance to subvert literary readings of the plays. The entirety of Barnes’s structure in print, alongside the specificity of her stage directions, including her extensive descriptions, served to reframe the narratives she presented. Specifically, Barnes was concerned with dominant cultural expectations and how they serve to limit insight. By interrupting these narratives, purposefully alienating the printed and performance genre from what either an audience or reader would expect, Barnes distanced them from the plays. Interrupting conventions was meant to create metatheatrical print that could not be undermined by the overriding culture.
Conclusion

Caselli describes Barnes as “an improper modernist,” believing that within the modernist period, Barnes “perform[ed] an unmodern, unfashionable, unconventional, and inopportune modernism” that was out of place among her peers (2, 4). Barnes’s relationship to the theatre demonstrated her unusual artistic ambitions that rejected familiar narratives in order to maintain critical distance from the culture on which she was commenting. She refused to ally her playtexts with either live performance or plays for reading. She reframed and recreated familiar narratives to challenge her audience/readership expectations. Barnes’s unique structures created a meta-commentary that critiqued ideas of masculine dominance and virility. The unfamiliar outcomes of recognizable tropes became difficult for the audience to understand and interpret. Barnes understood that despite the opportunities modernism gave for controversial depictions of non-heteronormative and patriarchal stories, there was always the danger of becoming representative of the mainstream culture. Her plays were meant to challenge in order to ensure a constant, critical, and self-reflexive discourse from all of her readers.

Barnes’s play texts reveal an attempt to interrupt live performance. Through narrative disconnects that emphasize absence and disjunction, Barnes encouraged a literary reading of the stage and a theatrical reading of text. By realigning literature with performance and performance with literature, Barnes created meta-commentary outside both theatrical and anti-theatrical space that subverted traditional hetero-normative and male-centred narratives. In other words, Barnes purposefully problematized the division between performance and print in order to comment on issues of representation concerning the role of women and sexuality. Removing the division between live performance and print allowed Barnes to effectively reposition the audience to read what is absent, unsaid, or implied, and question visual representations created in theatrical space.
CHAPTER 4
“IS IT TIME?”:
MARITA BONNER AND PRINT AS POLITICAL PLATFORM

In 1926, Marita Bonner wrote in a letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, “I would a lot [sic] to be able to write a one act for the New Negro Stage” (May 21, 1926). The concept of a ‘New Negro Stage,’ a stage that evolved out of and represented the experiences of African Americans, was still in its infancy.\(^4\) Black intellectuals of the period were developing artistic methodologies to promote social equality and encourage a black national identity. The creation of a black theatre was simply another artistic form to use in the push for new representations by black artists, for black audiences, and about the black community. The black theatre envisioned by leaders like Du Bois, Alain Locke, Gregory Montgomery, and Charles S. Johnson rejected the commercial theatre that trivialized black experiences and supported popular black stereotypes. Instead, the New Negro stage needed to establish narratives independent from and different to the dominant, racist framework for black stories and characters. Du Bois’s little theatre company, the Krigwa Players, founded in Harlem, New York, catered specifically to the African-American community. The group accomplished this specificity by using not only black actors and black community spaces, but also by exclusively using work by black playwrights. Although they were

\(^4\) In no way do I intend to suggest that there was no black theatre in this period. The Krigwa Players was not the first black theatre company but rather a company that became significant in its support and development of black playwrights. For information on other little black theatres prior to Krigwa, see Shandell, 103-117, and Sanders, 19-61. Furthermore, The Howard Players in Washington, D.C. formed the first National Black Theatre in 1921. For the purpose of this chapter, I am interested specifically in the black little theatre movement where the Krigwa Players existed as a significant development for black plays.
not the only black theatre company, the Krigwa Players were a significant cultural milestone for theatre in Harlem Renaissance.\(^{42}\)

Bonner, who graduated from Radcliffe in 1922 with a degree in English and Comparative Literature, was familiar with all-black and interracial university productions. Even after she moved to Washington, D.C. in 1924, Bonner attended “all the Howard [University] dramatic productions” (Letter to Du Bois, May 21, 1926).\(^{43}\) She understood the political significance of Du Bois’s vision of a separate, semi-professional, if community-based, black theatre. Her letter reveals that she aspired to write plays like J.M. Barrie’s *The Twelve-Pound Look* (1910) and Maeterlinck’s *La Mort de Tintagiles* (1896), plays concerned with women’s independence and political injustice.

Like many women of the period, Bonner had to work full time to support herself and pursue her writing independently. Although a regular member (also known as a Saturday Nighter) of fellow playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson’s\(^{44}\) ‘S’ Street salon, and an active member of the Harlem Renaissance throughout the 1920s, Bonner eventually disappeared from the creative scene. Prior to her retreat from publication, however, she wrote and published two essays, a collection of short stories, and three one-act plays: *The Pot Maker: a play to be read* (1926), *The Purple Flower* (1928), and *Exit, an Illusion* (1929).

“Whether by intention or not,” Bonner’s plays never reached the stage (Sullivan 310). Rather, they circulated through print. Each play was submitted as part of the writing competitions initiated by the black journals, the Urban League’s *The Opportunity: a Journal of*

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\(^{42}\) Krigwa was initially Crigwa as the name was an acronym for the Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists. See Burke, 86.

\(^{43}\) Bonner is most likely referring to productions by the Howard Players at Howard University. The university was an all-black institution whose dramatic productions supposedly surpassed those at Harvard. Perkins notes that “it was through the Howard Players that many black women received their initial training in playwriting,” Perkins, Introduction, 7.

\(^{44}\) Hereafter referred to as Douglas Johnson.
Negro Life (1923-1949) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) The Crisis (1910-present). These journals were dedicated to promoting the political, artistic, and philosophical ideology of the Harlem Renaissance by creating a cultural niche for the black community to express itself. African-American artists like Bonner took advantage of this new space available to them to publish a variety of work, including plays. The journals thus created a place to develop and cultivate a new theatrical canon of black playwrights for future performance. In order to have black theatre, plays by black playwrights needed to accumulate to create a performance repertoire. Writing competitions allowed for the best work to receive critical attention and, possibly, a dramatic production.

Dramatic writing during Bonner’s lifetime was not easily divided between performance-texts and plays for reading. Alongside the modernist use of print and performance to cultivate artistic innovation against the dominant culture, as established in chapter 3, there remained, for black artists, restrictions on where their work could, or would, be produced or published. Modernism’s alternative space was dominated by white artists and, whatever progressive values existed, continued to systematically marginalize and exoticize black Americans. The Harlem Renaissance aimed to construct a black modernist space, with the political intent of challenging ideas of race in the United States. Dramatic writing by black playwrights was part of the cultural development encouraged by the Harlem Renaissance. These plays served as culturally significant endeavours through both publication and production.

Black women had even fewer options for performance and publication than their male peers. Sally Burke notes that “female playwrights who were black were invariably limited to publishing” and fringe spaces because of their gender (65). As a black woman, it was virtually impossible to live by creative means. Even as commercial opportunities opened for men, women
theatre artists were “doubly disadvantaged, discriminated against because of both race and
gender,” in writing for the commercial, and financially viable, stage (Burke 85). Publication,
then, was one of the few ways women dramatists could develop their work and one of the few ways their work could be circulated.

Despite Bonner’s interest in production as voiced in her letters to Du Bois, her plays were only produced in print. Scholars continue to speculate as to why Bonner’s plays never reached the stage during her lifetime. Kathy Perkins suggests that the plays “demand[ed] technical requirements” beyond the scope of locally produced black theatre (190). Lack of funding and smaller venues, such as churches, libraries, and high schools, where black theatre groups like the Krigwa Players performed, limited technical resources in performance and made complex staging, lighting, and sound requirements nearly impossible. Addell Austin believes that, despite Bonner’s participation in the Washington, D.C. chapter of the Krigwa Players, fellow members were unaware of Bonner’s plays, thus indicating that she was uninterested in theatrical production (Pioneering 150). Meanwhile, Meredith Taylor and Alison Berg believe all of Bonner’s plays were “most likely” intended only for reading (469). Rather than examine performative intent as separate from publication, I will discuss the relationship of Bonner’s plays to print as a political platform that circulated outside segregated social boundaries. More specifically, I will establish the complex relationship between print and theatrical production in the Harlem Renaissance and how Bonner used dramatic text to carve out a political platform for herself that suited her personal ideology and experience as a black woman and challenged, supported, and subverted cultural ideas of unity and nationalism to advocate for radical change. First, I will examine Exit, an Illusion and The Pot Maker in order to establish Bonner’s unique voice and perspective on issues of race and gender. Then, using The Purple Flower, I will argue
that Bonner attempted to deconstruct political arguments and questions of race-identity to argue for a global and unified movement against oppression.

**Political representation through art**

Born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1898, Bonner grew up during the rise of the Harlem Renaissance, a precursor to the Civil Rights movement. The abolition of slavery, combined with the construction of an American national identity and aided by modernization, created new employment opportunities for black Americans that enabled upward socio-economic mobility. The Harlem Renaissance was part of a larger global movement that challenged concepts of colonialism, racism, and imperialism. The ideological goal was to advocate for new rights and challenge the existing social standards that kept the black community separate from and unequal to the white society.

The politics of the Harlem Renaissance responded directly to the systemic oppression and marginalization of the black community that included enforced racial segregation and cultural stereotypes that perpetuated and encouraged race prejudice in both white and black Americans. Modernism’s counterculture represented new ways of challenging the dominant and mainstream ideologies present in art, literature, and theatre. Using similar counterculture methodologies, the black community constructed beneficial narratives that challenged racism and offered new representations of black characters. The new representative identity, known as the ‘New Negro,’ was “a dialectical engagement with whiteness and blackness in the formation of an alternative cultural ideal” that rejected the dominant white imagining of race and identity (Stewart 17).

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45 According to Roses and Randolph, Bonner was born in 1898. Flynn and Brown-Guillory note the date as 1899. Because Randolph and Roses state they received their information directly from a birth certificate, it is the date I am listing.

46 While “Harlem Renaissance” is the popular term for this particular movement, in reality what is considered the Harlem Renaissance had many overlapping movements. See Hutchinson, 1-4.
Balancing the New Negro identity within the expectations of white society created what Jeffrey C. Stewart calls “a cultural citizenship” where identity was “defined by culture instead of politics” (17). Black cultural and political leaders attempted to bridge the old rural and the new urban identity through political discourse, debate, and art.

George Hutchinson has described the emerging literary scene as “a product of overlapping social and intellectual circles, parallel developments, intersecting groups and competing visions” in response to racial oppression (1). Addressing representations meant addressing the diverse experiences of black Americans across the country while attempting to reconcile these experiences into a recognizable cultural unity. In order to create cultural unity, there needed to be collective motivation that served the betterment of the black community as a whole, building on ideas of upward mobility and achieving the same standard of living as white Americans. At the same time, however, issues of class and gender remained an underlying problem for cultural outreach. The cultural aspirations expressed by leaders of the Harlem Renaissance such as Locke, Du Bois, and Langston Hughes needed to reach and reflect a broader audience than the educated, economically secure, and predominantly male elite.

The journals Crisis and Opportunity were created specifically to confront social stigmas, circulating philosophical, artistic, and political positions to a wide audience through print. Du Bois, in the first issue of Crisis, stated that the purpose of the publication was “to set forth those facts and arguments which show the danger of race prejudice, particularly as manifested to-day toward colored people,” and, overall, to “stand for the rights of man, irrespective of color or race” (Editorial, The Crisis 10). Thirteen years later, Charles S. Johnson47 started Opportunity, stating that the journal was “a venture inspired by a long insistent demand, both general and

47 Hereafter referred to as Johnson.
specific, for a journal of Negro life that would devote itself religiously to an interpretation of the social problems of the Negro population” (“Why We Are”). Through print, both journals created culturally relevant space to address systemic marginalization by giving voice to the black community. Simultaneously, the ability to mass-produce journals solved the problem of community outreach. Publications could circulate in virtually any space, across the country and access a large and diverse audience.

**Bonner and privilege in the Harlem Renaissance**

Reaching a diverse audience did not necessarily translate into representing diversity of experience. Bonner, who had not only lived in several different cities including Boston, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, but also came from a family that had experienced the benefits of upward mobility, witnessed varied experiences in different multi-ethnic and socio-economic communities. Much of Bonner’s work was critical of segregation and how it limited intercultural understanding and the ability to empathize and sympathize across races. She was inclined to bridge the divide between different experiences in order to cultivate cultural, racial, economic, and gender-based similarities.

Her father, Joseph Bonner, was a former slave who was freed through marriage to Bonner’s mother, Mary A. Nowell. Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph note that Bonner’s father “worked long and hard to support his growing family…and provide them with the education that he had not had” (166). As part of the black middle class, Bonner had opportunities that were not readily available to others. Middle-class black identity was fraught with complications, particularly for women. Bonner was frustrated by the problematic assumption that ‘blackness’ equalled a community devoid of other social differentiations like
economic status and gender. She later admitted to Du Bois that “the first contact [she] ever had with Negro masses was [not until her time] in Washington, D.C.” (Letter to Du Bois, Nov. 1, 1935). Her separation from the black community in her early years served to highlight similarities in oppression that crossed race boundaries. Turning her attention to the politics of the Harlem Renaissance, Bonner became aware that within communities that presumed unified experiences, there remained differences that enforced marginalization based on factors besides race.

The socio-economic benefits Bonner experienced both in her early life and while working as a teacher cast the shadow of privilege over her personal pursuits. Much of her writing attempted to reconcile the opportunities her class afforded her with the constant oppression she personally witnessed and experienced. Bonner had access to a high level of education that provided her with employment that earned her some financial independence. At the same time, she felt obliged, because of her privilege, to push for social equality irrespective of race, gender, or socio-economic status. In her essay “On Being Young—a Woman—and Coloured,” published in *Crisis* in 1925, Bonner wrote, “All your life you have heard of the debt you owe ‘Your People’ because you have managed to have the things they have not largely had” (3).\textsuperscript{48} Attempting to critique the narrow definitions of blackness, femininity, and class became a central theme in Bonner’s writing. Moreover, she wanted to inspire unity that confronted privilege within the community in order to overcome larger forms of oppression.

In writing this critique, however, Bonner found there were still limitations in style and content because of her gender and race. Bonner’s writing instructor at Radcliffe, white theatre

\textsuperscript{48} This essay proved incredibly popular. Du Bois received a request from Mary E. Switzer for a copy of the issue of *Crisis* in which it was published. Switzer helped create the Vocational Rehabilitation Act in 1954. She was a graduate of Radcliffe College in 1921. See Switzer, Letter to the Editor.
critic and writer Charles Townsend Copeland,\textsuperscript{49} told her “to write—but not to be ‘bitter’—a cliché to colored people who write” (Bonner qtd. in Roses and Randolph 167). Copeland’s advice is echoed in Bonner’s “On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored,” in which she suggests that the layering of racial identity with gender led to a much more complex oppression. To Bonner, how black women expressed themselves, how they tackled issues of oppression, needed to be different from their male contemporaries. There were different rules for women, regardless of race, and, therefore, women had to establish their political voice in the Harlem Renaissance to both complement and interrogate the politics of the movement that perpetuated gender oppression. Bonner wrote, “being a woman, you have to go about [being angry] gently and quietly, to find out and to discover just what is wrong. Just what can be done” (“On Being” 6). Speaking out was an act that required cultural negotiation between the politics of being black and being a black woman. As a woman, Bonner had to use the creative forms and spaces available to her while adopting creative styles that would make her audience and readers connect with her arguments, and not outright reject them.

Ultimately, Bonner’s dramatic writing created a space where she could examine and openly criticize the limitations of racial and gender oppression and encourage her readers to do the same. She used familiar scenarios in order to represent issues of race, gender, and class. These scenarios included family meals, visiting doctors, and random encounters on street corners, all of which enabled her to reveal inherent biases in both the overarching system (white-dominated society) and in the system pushing against oppression (the Harlem Renaissance). \textit{The Purple Flower}, Bonner’s best-known play, can be seen as the culmination of her complex

\textsuperscript{49} Before “On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored,” a letter to Du Bois requesting a correction reveals her “sketch \textit{Dandelion Season} was selected to be read annually” in Copeland’s class at Radcliffe. See Bonner, Letter to Du Bois, December 14, 1925.
perspective on issues of race, class, and gender in a movement meant to challenge racial stereotypes and promote social equality.

The Literary Scene: Publishing and the Black Little Theatre Movement

Print was integral to the circulation of the ideas espoused by the black educated middle class, and therefore the content of the journals *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, and the environment in which they were read, were equally important. *Crisis* and *Opportunity* were concerned not only with confronting common stereotypes promoted through a wide variety of media, including minstrel shows, advertisements, and literature, but also with developing counter-narratives. Circulating positive depictions of black culture in the form of short stories, plays, essays, editorials, and illustrations by black artists worked to counteract internalized prejudice and also influenced white prejudice and bias. Print served as a platform accessible to the black community and available to the white community. Du Bois, who was editor of *Crisis*, and Johnson, editor of *Opportunity*, were both dedicated to challenging issues of race such as stereotypes, socio-economic realities, and equality. According to Austin, Johnson “wanted to use black literature to affect white attitudes” ("Opportunity and Crisis" 236). He hoped to capitalize on white cultural interest in the Harlem Renaissance to engage with white communities alongside the black community. Meanwhile, Du Bois “seemed less concerned about influencing whites and instead directed black literary efforts to an Afro-American readership” (Austin

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50 For a discussion of confronting racist depictions prevalent in the early twentieth century, see Goeser 1-14, and Hatch, “American Minstrelsy,” 93-133.

51 One particular problem encountered by black Americans in the Harlem Renaissance was the internalized negative perception that dominant white narratives cultivated. Du Bois’s essay “On Being Ashamed of One’s Self” discusses the effects of internalized racism and the need to fight it.

52 Du Bois acted as the lead editor of *Crisis* from its inception in 1910 to 1934. Jessie Fauset became the literary editor from 1919 to 1926, with Du Bois stepping into the position again after Fauset left. See Wall, “Women of the Harlem Renaissance,” 33.
The difference between Johnson’s and Du Bois’s use of black culture translated into the content and purpose of their respective journals.

In order to accumulate new narratives, Johnson and Du Bois devised writing contests to encourage black artists to submit work. *Opportunity* held the first writing contest in August 1924, closely followed by *Crisis* announcing their contest a few months later. Cash prizes were awarded and all prizewinning works were published. In keeping with their respective opinions on how best to use creative content, *Crisis* and *Opportunity* ensured that contest entries were judged according to their interests. For Johnson, this meant having primarily white judges, while Du Bois had a larger ratio of black to white judges. According to Austin, initially “eighteen of the twenty-four judges used by *Opportunity* were white, as compared to the nine white and seven black judges employed by *Crisis*” (*Pioneering* 24). The judges aligned with Johnson and Du Bois’s goals, and ultimately directly impacted which plays were selected. In turn, black playwrights developed their work according to contest specifications, the interests of the journal editors, and the interests of the judges.

Publication in either journal was both a political statement for the Harlem Renaissance and a political statement for the editors, which meant that creative form and content needed to align with contest requirements in order to win. The creative control exhibited by Johnson and Du Bois over content and form was strong enough to lead some writers to criticize the journals. Even play styles were subject to editorial preference. Carol Allen notes that “*Opportunity* chose folk works a bit more than the *Crisis*, which concentrated on the problem play” (*Peculiar Passages* 90). Both journals requested one-act plays.

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53 Some of the judges for both contests included Robert Frost, Eugene O’Neill, Alexander Woollcott, Gregory Montgomery, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke. See Austin, “*Opportunity* and *Crisis,*” 238, and “*Judges for the Contest,*” 340.
Although both Johnson and Du Bois wanted to create a black performance canon by encouraging new playwrights, they had different goals for black theatre. Johnson required only that plays “deal with some phase of Negro life” however small, leaving creative space for interpretation (“Opportunity’s Literary Prize Contest” 277). Furthermore, he prioritized publication over production, initially focusing on encouraging playwriting without the added pressure of performance. Du Bois, in contrast, was specific about the creative input he wanted. Plays in particular were meant to serve as propaganda to help advocate for equal rights with attention to inspiring the black community to action. In other words, Du Bois wanted theatre that spoke directly to and represented the African-American community in order to encourage political involvement. Thus, for Du Bois, the New Negro theatre had to be:

One: About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro Life as it is.

Two: By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. Three: For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their engagement and approval. Fourth: Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.

(KRIGWA Players Program)

Du Bois founded the Krigwa Players in 1926 to stage prizewinning plays from the Crisis contest. The idea of a community-based theatre was so popular that chapters of the Krigwa Players opened across the United States. Drawing directly from plays published in the journals, black actors could perform in plays that represented their experiences. Du Bois effectively used the space Crisis created for black dramatists in print to open possibilities for performance across the country. Not all prize-winners were performed, however, and contests were not necessarily the
only avenue for a play to achieve production. For women, however, publication remained the most accessible space for dramatic work.

**Black women playwrights and accessing creative space**

Women were major participants in the black little theatre movement. Jennifer Burton notes that “the majority of the plays submitted to the *Opportunity* and *Crisis* play contests were by women and women won most of the prizes” (xxiii). In creating an alternative, community-based performance space, Du Bois had cultivated an environment where black women could participate freely. Allen even suggests that women “may have even preferred the familiarity of library basements, church halls, lodges, school auditoriums, and even kitchens, parlors and backyards…because these places could reach readily black women, children, and men” (*Passages* 24). At the same time, however, community-based theatre, while accessible, was not necessarily easily sustainable for practical reasons including, but not limited to, financial realities. Furthermore, print “was critical in providing professional outlets for African-American women playwrights” when there was no guarantee of production (Burton xx). If published, a play could still circulate for an audience. Therefore if the play was politically relevant, publication left the opportunity for engaging with readers.

Publication remained integral for women to create their own space for political and personal expression. Women playwrights had to carefully construct narratives that gave voice to their politics in accordance not only with contest specifications, but also the political aspirations of the journal editors. Allen explains that “[t]his cooperative link [their methodology to confront racism and create and support black artists] that bound together the journal or the targeted drama collection with uplift-oriented female playwrights impacted on both the form and content” of
plays by black women (*Passages* 90). Form included the length of plays and number of words. Roses and Randolph in their examination of the unpublished work in Bonner’s journal note marginal “clarifications,” editorial comments, and “running word count[s]…as if the author were testing the story for conformity to length specifications of some magazine or newspaper” (170). Their description highlights the strict structural specifications required for journal publication.

Allen argues that black women’s plays were “meant to enter some of the more intimate spaces in black spheres” through publication (*Passages* 92). Bonner, in particular, believed access to stories was just as important as the politics within the stories themselves. The stories had to reach an audience in order to influence it. Fiction in print, no matter the form, could also make new perspectives accessible to different people. In a 1937 application to the Rosenwald Fund, Bonner wrote, “all people read stories—and most people only get their knowledge of the colored race from what they read” (Plan of Work 1937). Through publication in *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, Bonner could craft her narratives for the specific readership of both journals. In fact, her short story *Drab Rambles* was reprinted in “pamphlet form” in order to “distribute the story among people whom the association [the Urban League] hoped to interest in the purpose of the league” (Plan of Work 1937). Accessing the content of the journals was important to the black community as a whole, but for women, as Allen suggested, it was significant for cultural critiques of not just white prejudice but also gender and class issues in the movement. Therefore, the network through which women constructed their plays and formed literary connections created a literary environment. By integrating concerns such as gender or class into their writing, black women writers ensured that these issues were brought to the front of community consciousness.

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54 Published in 1928, the story has three sections and is concerned with the issues faced by low-income black workers including the inability to take medical leave and sexual harassment and coercion.
Salons played an important role in positioning black women’s writing in a significant political context that engaged with black community leaders. For playwrights, salons placed their plays in a space where they could be read in a participatory manner and subsequently discussed. Krasner explains that “the Saturday Nighters’ [members of Douglas Johnson’s salon] facilitated a literary style stressing a world made possible if audiences could be compelled to absorb the artistic message” (“The Dark Tower” 83). Writing was meant to represent possibilities that could inspire readers to change the world around them. The salon space added new dimensions to dramatic work by creating a private environment to better cultivate political and philosophical thought that could unite the black community. Soyica Diggs Colbert, in her essay “Drama in the Harlem Renaissance,” describes the salon as “a space where artists conceived of new work and received feedback on work in progress” (89). For women, the salons created a space where questions of gender could be integrated with Harlem Renaissance ideology because salon members would engage critically with the text, including those members in positions of power in the community at large. Allen argues that “black women writers explored various genres, searching for textual places which would allow them to represent a dense and diverse range of topics” (Black Women Intellectuals 6). Salons, in turn, helped translate the conflicts women identified in their creative work into politically relevant discourse.

Within salons, play content became significant for addressing problems in the Harlem Renaissance movement. Elizabeth Guillory-Brown suggests there were “seven forms” of plays by black women playwrights: “(1) protest, (2) genteel school, (3) folk, (4) historical (interchangeable with race pride and black nationalism), (5) religious, (6) fantasy, and (7) feminist” (Guillory-Brown, Their Place 5). Douglas Johnson’s salon was both a literary hub and, according to Perkins, a “refuge” beyond Harlem that created a community for artists and students
in Washington, D.C. (22). The salon was also a space where black women writers, including Jessie Fauset, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Mary Burrill, met. Cheryl Wall believes “these interconnections suggest the existence of an informal network of literary black women” (“Women of the Harlem Renaissance” 33). Many women involved in the Harlem Renaissance supported each other’s writing. Wall notes, for instance, that Jessie Fauset “helped put [black women writers’] work into print” during her time as editor at *Crisis* from 1919 to 1926 (“To tell the truth about us” 84). Nancy Kuhl also points out that Douglas Johnson “often highlighted the work of women writers at her salon… [and, in particular] promoted [Bonner] by featuring her work on Saturday evenings” (119). The informal network that women constructed for themselves in salons reveals that, despite the goals of the Harlem Renaissance to address social inequality, women were still required to support each other. Bonner’s participation in the salon, unsurprisingly, encouraged her decision to write and publish.

Not long after joining the Saturday Nighters, Bonner began submitting her work to *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. The fact that her plays were written during her time in Washington, D.C. suggests that alongside her personal interest in the theatre, Bonner may have seen play-scripts in the salon setting as encouraging larger cultural debates over the depictions in and of the black community. Furthermore, the support women offered each other no doubt helped Bonner with her writing. The salons and publication gave Bonner’s playwriting a space to be heard. Her play-content, then, served to express her political perspectives using her unique creative style.

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55 Fauset’s own contributions to the Harlem Renaissance have been “largely ignored.” See Wall, “‘To tell the truth about us,’” 89.
56 The two women became lifelong friends. Several of Bonner’s letters to Du Bois reveal that Douglas Johnson encouraged Bonner to seek employment at *Crisis*, that the two women traveled together, and that Bonner was in contact with Douglas Johnson long after the latter stopped hosting her salons. See Bonner, Letter to Du Bois, April 10, 1928, November 1, 1935, and January 3, 1929.
57 The NAACP’s Drama Committee was located in D.C. Brown-Guillory suggests this is the reason “nearly all of the early black women playwrights are connected with Washington D.C.” (*Their Place* 4).
Bonner’s Plays

Bonner embraced theatrical imagery in her plays. Joyce Flynn notes that her plays “feature elaborate stage directions couched in Bonner’s second-person narration,” a staple of her writing first seen in her essay “On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored” (xviii). The stage directions implied reader knowledge of setting, space, scene, and character by starting sentences with “you know” or “you wonder” (Bonner, Pot Maker 17; Exit, an Illusion 48). Esther Sullivan suggests that the second-person narrative in stage directions “foregrounds the participation of the reader…[and] implies that the reader is already there, involved, and implicated in the problem” (310). Second-person stage directions served Bonner’s interest in creating reader engagement by making the play part of her readers’ real-life experiences.

Her first play, The Pot Maker, represents a culmination of Bonner’s experiences in the Harlem Renaissance. Perkins believes The Pot Maker, “with its rural and simple setting, shows the strong influence of [Douglas] Johnson” (189). Significantly, Bonner’s subtitle was “a play to be read,” indicating that she did not intend production. The time of publication ties The Pot Maker to Bonner’s participation in the ‘S’ Street salon. Furthermore, the chosen style of the play, folk drama, positions it with Johnson’s ideology. As a Saturday Nighter, Bonner emphasized the literariness of the play through her subtitle. The salon setting would have allowed the play to be read and discussed by anyone in attendance. Bonner’s decision to submit the work to Opportunity likely influenced her decision to write a folk play with no immediate expectation for dramatic production of the work. Finally, Bonner’s audience would be multi-ethnic because that was the intent behind the journal. All of this suggests that Bonner saw The Pot Maker’s publication as a chance to widely circulate her political ideas and influence a large audience.
The Pot Maker depicts a family gathering where a naive husband, Elias Jackson, discovers his wife, Lucinda, has been having an affair with a local man, Lew. Over the course of the play, the relationship between Lucinda and Elias deteriorates as he learns the truth about her affair. Meanwhile, Lew, waiting for Lucinda to sneak out to attend a dance with him, falls into an old well. When Lucinda suffers the same fate trying to save her lover, the play culminates with Elias’s own rescue attempt. Simply structured, The Pot Maker examines idealism in the face of familial and financial realities. Elias, “called from the cornfields by God,” tells his family a religious parable about a pot maker that reveals how flaws diminish people (Bonner, The Pot Maker 18). The parable, however, serves to underscore Elias’s own failings. Lucinda points out that Elias “ain’t even got sense enough to keep a job” and has condemned both of them to being financially dependent on his parents (26). Elias’s naivete, his focus on the questionable ‘call from god,’ has forced Lucinda to seek a connection with Lew. Brown-Guillory highlights several concerns in the play, including Bonner’s “refus[al] to romanticize the rural South” and “women who are devalued in a male-dominated society” (Wines in the Wilderness 2). By the end of the play, Lucinda’s insistence on saving her lover from drowning in the well becomes a punishment for her and a punishment for Elias. It is Lucinda’s extra-marital affair that kills Lew, but it is Elias’s refusal to help until it is too late that might result in the death of both him and his wife. The play ends before the reader discovers if Elias manages to overcome his flaws. Bonner notes that the lack of solution is “all there will be. A crack has been healed. A pot has spilled over on the ground. Some wisps have twisted out” (The Pot Maker 29).

Using Bonner’s second-person stage directions, the play repositioned the reader to re-evaluate her characters and the space they occupied. In her description of Lucinda, for instance, Bonner writes, “Then you must relax in your chair as the door at the right opens and Lucinda
walks in. ‘Exactly the woman,’ you decide. For at once you can see she is a woman who must have sat down in the mud” (*The Pot Maker* 18). The description purposefully made the reader construct Lucinda’s appearance based on their personal expectations. As Bonner asks, “can you see [the characters]? Do you know them?” (*The Pot Maker* 19). Making her readers identify with the characters would subsequently make them identify with the circumstances in the play, therefore turning the reader’s gaze towards their own communities. Bonner’s writing attempted to bridge the larger issue of marginalization with the smaller, day-to-day experiences of different communities, including financial realities and complicated familial relationships. Bridging this particular gap drew parallels between the universal experience of discrimination with other complex issues of gender and class.

After *The Pot Maker*, Bonner’s plays evolved to further complicate ideological discourse about race, gender, and class. *Exit, an Illusion* and *The Purple Flower*, both published in *Crisis*, won Bonner first prize in the 1927 writing contest.58 Du Bois was the sole judge of the contest entries, revealing that, in his view at least, Bonner’s work was artistically and politically significant. While *The Purple Flower* was submitted at the same time as *Exit, an Illusion*, the latter play was the last to be published. Both plays are surrealist in style and, unlike *The Pot Maker*, are not labeled by Bonner as ‘for reading.’ Her decision to submit these works to the *Crisis* suggests that Bonner was not limiting these two plays to print circulation and was

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58 Scholars refer to *Exit, an Illusion* as the last play Bonner wrote. The play was submitted as part of a collection of work, including *The Purple Flower*, to the 1927 *Crisis* writing contest. Curiously, Du Bois held off on publishing the play long enough for Bonner to write two letters to him, first requesting the play be returned to her, and second to request that if he does publish it, he does so using her pseudonym Joyce Noel Reed because her principal disapproved of the work. Du Bois refused to publish Bonner’s work under a pseudonym, insisting she be proud of her work. See Bonner, Letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, January 1929, Du Bois, Letter to Marita Bonner, 11 September 1929, and Bonner, Letter to Du Bois, 8 June 1929.
considering production. This position is supported by Bonner’s excitement about enquiries by Maude Cuney-Hare to produce *Exit, an Illusion*.59

In *Exit, an Illusion*, as in *The Pot Maker*, Bonner focuses on domestic space. The central conflict is between the bi-racial “pale as the sheets” Dot and her partner, the “blackly brown” Buddy (Bonner, *Exit, an Illusion* 47-8). Dot claims to have a date with the mysterious Exit Mann, a white, death-like figure whose presence spurs Buddy to murder her. The play is concerned with examining inter- and intraracial relationships with particular attention to violence against bi-racial women. The play draws an interesting parallel between black masculinity and white masculinity, and the use of violence in response to insecurities created and perpetuated by race stereotypes. Dot’s “passing” as white gives her more power than Buddy, a fact she throws in his face by hurling racist epithets about him and his friends (Bonner *Exit, an Illusion* 50). Her date with Exit leads Buddy to state that Dot will “go off like [she] lived! lying in some man’s arms—then lying to [him]” (*Exit, an Illusion* 55). Allen explains that “by killing Dot off, Bonner, who was herself quite brown, dispatches with this intercessory buffer role and forces Buddy to confront his own construction of female value—the lighter the skin, the more valuable commodity” (*Peculiar Passages* 118). Meanwhile, Exit Mann’s whiteness exists as an inherent threat to Buddy, but it is Dot who suffers when Exit’s face is shown to be the “hollow eyes and fleshless cheeks of Death” (*Exit, an Illusion* 132). Within the play, it is never entirely clear if Exit is real, or if he is a manifestation of Buddy’s insecurities about both his status as a black man in society and his place in Dot’s life, but either way, the outcome for Dot remains the same: she dies. Exit and Buddy are ultimately the same in their violence even if their motives differ.

59 Maud Cuney-Hare was founder of and playwright for the Allied Arts Centre. She expressed interest in producing *Exit, an Illusion*. See Bonner, Letter to Du Bois, 22 January 1928.
There are two significant similarities in *The Pot Maker* and *Exit, an Illusion*. First, both plays are concerned with domestic space. Second, they question the characterization of women and men within the black community. Both plays emphasize strife that, although influenced by racial oppression, is also perpetuated by the ignorance of Elias and Buddy. Dot and Lucinda are portrayed as sympathetic, if not entirely innocent. Together, the characters represent the complex dangers of oppression within the home. *The Purple Flower* applies these same subtle criticisms on a larger scale.

*The Purple Flower*

In contrast to *The Pot Maker* and *Exit, an Illusion*, *The Purple Flower* creates a fantastical space where Bonner can historicise marginalization, reposition narratives of oppression, and call for action against injustice in a broader context. At the same time, Bonner uses the play, in print form, to challenge marginalization and encourage unity for radical change. Finally, the play circumvented audience limitations through publication in *Crisis* to reach a wide audience, with the possibility of production in the future.

*The Purple Flower*, according to Flynn, is “generally regarded as Bonner’s masterpiece” (xviii). One *Crisis* reader declared *The Purple Flower* “the last word in fantasy” after its publication (Anonymous qted in Du Bois Letter to Marita Bonner 11, January 1928). The plot of the play is relatively simple. The Us’s live in the valley between Nowhere and Somewhere while the Sundry White Devils live on the hill, Somewhere. The Us’s are “devis[ing] means” of getting up the hill, Somewhere, in order to reach the Flower-of-Life-at-its-Fullest (Bonner, *The Purple Flower* 312). Meanwhile, the White Devils “try every trick, known and unknown, to keep the Us’s from getting to the hill. For if the Us’s get up the hill, the Flower-of-Life-at-its-Fullest will
shed some of its perfume and then they will be Somewhere with the White Devils” (Bonner, *The Purple Flower* 369). The play is didactic, with the main action consisting of the debate between the Us’s over their current progress in trying to reach the Flower and their next course of action.

Much of the play is constructed to highlight the inequality between the Us’s and the White Devils, from the setting between Nowhere and Somewhere to the unusual set design and lighting description. Bonner divides the stage “horizontally into two sections, upper and lower, by a thin board,” although she never explicitly labels either section as Somewhere or Nowhere (Bonner, *The Purple Flower* 312). While “the main action takes place on the upper stage,” on the lower stage, “the light is never quite clear” and only “bright enough” for the audience to make out the physical action of the players (Bonner, *The Purple Flower* 312). Initially the set design, although complex, fits neatly into a visual representation of have and have-not through the division of the stage. By her first stage direction, however, Bonner literally changes the physical nature of the play world. The Us’s have “their backs toward Nowhere and their faces toward Somewhere” while “the White Devils are seen in the distance on the hillside” (Bonner, *The Purple Flower* 313). Bonner effectively creates a recognizable oppressive division between the White Devils and the Us’s as literally one on top of another but promptly undermines the simple image. In doing so, oppression manifests as a physically complex system that encourages rethinking the traditional oppressed and privileged positions in a non-hierarchical fashion. Establishing unconventional representations of oppression is promptly mirrored by Bonner’s refusal to depict the coming battle the play foreshadows as only between African Americans and white Americans.

Although, according to Berg and Taylor, *The Purple Flower* “draws on black folk types” instead of individual characters, the Us’s in the play do not conform entirely to a single racial
identity (471). Her set design and her description of the Us’s reveal “a multiplicity of racial markers” (Berg and Taylor 471). For instance, the Us’s, according to Bonner, “can be as white as the White Devils, as brown as the earth, as black as the centre of a poppy” (Bonner, The Purple Flower 312). Furthermore, strewn around the set, Bonner describes “mounds” that might be “something or nothing; but you see by a curve that there might lie a human body. There is thrust out a white hand—a yellow one—one brown—a black. The Skin-of-Civilization must be very thin” (Bonner, The Purple Flower 312). Nellie McKay believes that Bonner “place[d] black American oppression within the framework of world oppression based on the hierarchy of race” (143). Challenging racial identities allowed Bonner to refocus the conversation on the larger issue of oppression by linking it with smaller acts of marginalization. She wanted to emphasize systemic oppression that was not only based on race, but also on socio-economic status and gender. There needed to be a more complex redress of oppression that opened new social avenues for everyone. When the revolution came, Bonner wanted it to push for an equality that crossed all boundaries to create fundamental, long-lasting change.

Significantly, the characters in Flower are identified through generic names that represent their position. For example, the character called Average Us believes that “the Us will [climb the hill] if they get the right leaders,” but his dissatisfaction with the current state of the Us has made him apathetic (Bonner, The Purple Flower 313). To the others attending the meeting, he states: “Oh you know we ain’t going to get up there! No use worrying!” (314). Using the name “Average,” Bonner highlighted the dangers of apathy. These dangers were cultivated when there was too little progress and people stopped experiencing beneficial changes from revolutionary movements. Little or no progress cultivated hopelessness and led to accepting the status quo, resulting in continued oppression. In contrast, the character Finest Blood becomes a politically
important figure for the Us. He is ultimately willing to sacrifice himself in a fight with a White Devil in order to create change. The play ends with Finest Blood declaring to the White Devil: “You have taken blood: there can be no other way. You will have to give blood! Blood!” (Bonner, The Purple Flower 317). The Purple Flower’s call for blood as the ultimate solution for reaching the Flower is particularly striking for the historical context of the play’s composition when calls for action could inspire violent retaliation and discrimination from the dominant white society. James Hatch argues that the play “called for social and political revolution in an overt manner that other writers did not dare use until the militant 1960’s” (“Harlem Renaissance” 225). The literary focus of the Harlem leaders was meant to inspire discussion and avoid the trappings of violence that could result in death in the black community. Bonner’s recognition that violence was necessary for change revealed sharp criticism of the role of discourse and debate in achieving long-lasting and fundamental change.

Underneath the overarching push for revolution, Bonner subtly made references to gender dynamics that support the Us’s uprising. Two female characters, Cornerstone, “the middle-aged woman” who is Finest Blood’s mother, and Sweet “the young girl” who is his sister, become catalysts for change (Bonner, The Purple Flower 313). When Sweet is pinched by “a White Devil sitting in the bushes over in the dark,” Finest Blood is spurred to action to defend his sister (Bonner, The Purple Flower 315). Within little more than a few lines, the overtone of sexual violence is clear. The White Devil’s pinch inspires retaliation. The assault on Sweet opens Finest Blood to violent action, but Bonner also suggests that Finest Blood’s willingness to retaliate allows the rest of the Us’s to support this position. An Old Woman declares she “dreamed that [she] saw a White Devil cut in six pieces,” and this statement is followed by an Old Man stating “thank God! It’s time then” (Bonner, The Purple Flower 315). In the play, Bonner suggests a
connection between the action required for change and violence against women of colour by the White Devils. This small component of the play suggests that the larger goal, reaching the Flower, directly impacts other social issues, such as violence against women.

Taylor and Berg state that “the play identifies four possible routes to the purple flower—Work, Books, God, and Money” (471). *The Purple Flower*, however, rejects these routes as ineffective. McKay compares the play to the “more confrontational drama of the 1960’s and 1970’s” but still elevates Bonner’s political stance as “further than that of many of the militants who followed her forty years and more later” (144). Bonner ends *The Purple Flower* with:

> All the Us listen. All the valley listens. Nowhere listens. All the White Devils listen. Somewhere listens.

> Let the curtain close leaving all the Us, the White Devils, Nowhere, Somewhere, listening, listening. Is it time? (Bonner, *The Purple Flower* 317)

The underlying question of the play—“Is it time?”—anticipated the need for radical change. Bonner left the question echoing for her readers to consider after the debate among the Us. The arguments presented in the play closely examined how the movement against the White Devils was progressing. At the same time, Bonner also pointed out the continued frustrations within the Us community where there was constant dissension. Overall, Bonner encouraged her readers to analyze the ideas presented. She wanted her readers to reflect on the culmination of the arguments in the play to find and apply their own solutions to the issues presented.

After publication, Bonner told Du Bois that she was educating friends in black history and that she believed “they need[ed] the ‘Purple Flower’” (Letter to Du Bois, 22 Jan. 1928). Her letter reveals that Bonner viewed the play as an entryway to discussing and more fully understanding the issue of racial oppression. The structure of the play, including the set and
lighting description and an “Argument,” summarized the historical context of The Us and the White Devils: a history of slavery that has culminated into marginalization mirroring American colonial history. Allen suggests that Harlem Renaissance plays by women were “considered, by both writer and consumer, to be an extension of the schooling process” (Passages 91). By using a play-text to depict social oppression, Bonner interrogated ideas of marginalization. The didactic style functioned to analyze the current state of the Harlem Renaissance. She purposefully underscored the problems within the community while also drawing attention to similar battles fought by other groups. Bonner hoped to challenge privilege in a way that inspired cross-cultural unity against oppression in order to change the world.

Conclusion

During the Harlem Renaissance, print created alternative space for black artists. Racial segregation in the United States enforced a marginalized status that meant the African American community needed to create a platform to challenge prejudice. Print circumvented traditional barriers by circulating to a diverse audience, contributing content to discourse and debate in salons, and creating a theatrical canon for, by, and about the black community.

Bonner, aware of the audience that read circulating journals, and the limitations society constructed around her sex and race, viewed print as an accessible vehicle for her political expression. Her appreciation of art, and in particular stories, as a tool for education of a wide audience reveals that Bonner understood print was a significant platform to advocate for change. Although Bonner did not reject theatrical production, print better served her political interests. Print was a political platform that Bonner could adapt to engage and inspire her readers.
Bonner was also conscious that publishing dramatic work functioned differently from performance in that it could reach and engage a wider audience. Her experience in Douglas Johnson’s salon demonstrated the importance of sharing artistic works in spaces that engaged not just with the community, but also with community leaders. Furthermore, the inclusive nature of the salon allowed for critical discussion about her political and ideological concerns of privilege and oppression that influenced and critiqued ideas of cultural unification in her work. Bonner melded propaganda to artistic vision in an attempt to depict existing inequality, explain how inequality is perpetuated, and call attention to the radical action needed to produce social change. Stylistically, Bonner challenged the standard conventions of black drama that developed among her peers during the Harlem Renaissance. Instead of embracing pure propaganda for the black community, she wanted to critique the privilege within the Harlem Renaissance movement in order to inspire political unity against all forms of inequality.

Despite opportunities for theatrical production by black little theatre groups, print remained the best platform for Bonner’s progressive and complex criticism of society. At the same time, the love of theatre that inspired her plays initially was likely tempered by the lack of access and financial viability for working women. Bonner was unable to pursue writing full time, and the lack of support brought about as the Harlem Renaissance ended during the Great Depression made her re-evaluate the political staying power of dramatic work.

Bonner is considered the first black woman surrealist dramatist (Perkins 190). The stylistic influence of her work has been implied in at least two very important plays by American women playwrights. Perkins suggests that Adrienne Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro (1962) was influenced by The Purple Flower (190), while Brown-Guillory suggests that “Ntozake Shange’s 1975 for coloured girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf may be
linked to Bonner’s use of drum beat, dance, and song” (Their Place 98). Bonner’s unique style set her apart from the popular naturalistic form of her contemporaries. As a woman of colour, she valued print as necessary to cross artistic and social boundaries to promote change. Finally, the prescience and complexity of her political stance on race, gender, and class anticipated future artistic voices in the push for equality and proper representation. Bonner helped create a foundation for contemporary black women playwrights. Even in the twenty-first century, Bonner’s plays continue to ask society if it is time for change.
CONCLUSION:

RECONSIDERING PRINTED DRAMA

This thesis on closet drama has considered alternative methods of artistic engagement in order to acknowledge unconventional dramatic work. Cary, Cavendish, Barnes, and Bonner used dramatic print to circumvent social restrictions and engage with theatre. Their work, while unperformed, reflects their complex navigations of social restrictions that systematically prevented or controlled their participation in theatre, and their efforts to advocate for new cultural and philosophical considerations of gender, sexuality, and race. These playwrights used printed play-texts to serve their political interests and comment on dominant cultural narratives.

Each of these case studies demonstrates an inventive manipulation of dramatic form that offers a unique perspective on the interplay of theatre and dramatic text in society. Live performance was not the only way to influence social and political ideologies; print was an alternative. In considering the complex position of women’s unperformed texts in relation to theatre history, researchers should not assume that writers of ‘closet drama’ rejected or failed to achieve production without also considering the limitations of live performance for those outside the dominant culture. Cary, Cavendish, Barnes, and Bonner were women who experienced different forms of marginalization. Their work attempted to present their experiences in print and to circulate ideologically and politically relevant material to readers.

The plays of Cary, Cavendish, Barnes, and Bonner highlight the limitations of the term ‘closet drama’ and how labels restrict the integration of unperformed play-texts into the performance-based canon. The historical complexity of the modern and early modern periods that forced or encouraged performance through print is part of the larger narrative of oppression and isolation experienced by women playwrights that leaves them on the fringes of accounts of
relevant theatrical movements. Through print, these women challenged the theatrical genre and
gained political and artistic voices. As theatre scholars, our responsibility lies in recognizing how
closet drama functioned as printed performance and in integrating unperformed dramas by
marginalized groups into the theatrical canon.
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