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Teaching *Fancies*

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"Teaching *Fancies*"

by Lindsay Yakimyshyn

Early women's drama has gained attention in scholarship over the past three decades; however, female playwrights like Mary Sidney, Elizabeth Cary, Mary Wroth, and the Cavendish sisters remain scarce on the course syllabus. Certainly, Sidney's *Tragedy of Antonie* and Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam* have begun to appear in upper-year early modern courses, often as token women writers on a male-dominated reading list. Still, the place and value of early female-authored plays in survey courses beg re-examination.

Specifically, the household comedy *The Concealed Fancies*, written by Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley, is hardly canonical; yet, with a lower profile, shorter length, and more accessible language than Shakespeare, this play is less daunting to students in a first-year survey course. Further, the young ages of the playwrights—Brackley was 19 years old and Cavendish was 24 years old around the time of composition—make the material relatable. *The Concealed Fancies* suits a historical perspective nicely, and can facilitate exciting dialogues regarding familial allusions, self-referential characters, gender relations, and generic and theatrical conventions in

the early modern milieu. Because the play was written at the height of the English Civil War and “fills a gap” between the “closeted” women’s writing at the beginning of the seventeenth century and the public stage-plays by Restoration women, it makes a distinctive contribution to a course. In particular, it resonates extremely well with an “Instability and Identity” theme. However, the play also fits well in an upper-year seventeenth-century or, even more narrowly, Interregnum literature course. Expanding the purview to place *The Concealed Fancies* alongside non-seventeenth-century texts, the play makes a productive addition to courses with the following foci: women’s literature, wartime literature, English drama, and world drama. Creative pairings, such as Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* for wartime literature or Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* for world drama, offer many teaching possibilities. These multitudinous possibilities lie outside of the scope of this article; here, I will focus on the potential of *The Concealed Fancies* in an undergraduate survey course.

Courtship and marriage drive *The Concealed Fancies*. As the play opens—following prologue material—Courtley and Presumption strategize on how to woo their mistresses, Luceny and Tattiney, whose rehearsed behavior and questioning of gender norms complicate the courting game. Two other courtship strains emerge, as well: Lady Tranquility pursues Monsieur Calsindow, father to Luceny, Tattiney, and the Stellow brothers; and the Stellow brothers pursue the cousins at Ballamo castle. “[T]he enemy” (III.iv.3) captures Ballamo and the cousins (Cicilley, Sh., and Is.) that

reside there, thereby disrupting heterosexual love. The seizure of Ballamo also interrupts the main courtships, as Luceny and Tattiney enter the convent and assume nuns' habits. To restore heteronormativity, the Stellow brothers rescue Cicilley, Sh., and Is. and Courtley and Presumption disturb their mistresses' newfound positions as women religious. Disguising themselves as gods, Courtley and Presumption convince Luceny and Tattiney to "remove their nuns' habits and put on the ordinary cloaks" (stage direction following V.ii.38). The playwrights attempt to tie the courtship strands together with the return of Monsieur Calsindow, who approves all of his children's betrothals only to have an angel thwart his own (newly established) romantic interest in Toy. Even Lady Tranquility winds up in a normative union with Tattiney's rejected suitor, Corpulant. In the Epilogue, Luceny and Tattiney reflect upon their negotiation of the wifely role, advocating equality in marriage. Nancy Cotton suggests the plot of *The Concealed Fancies* is incoherent (40), and her point is well-taken, as the action often feels disjointed. By attending to the function of subplots (to parallel and contrast characterizations and reinforce thematic elements), though, the instructor can clarify the sense of haphazardness and begin to explore specific themes and ideas that emerge in the text.

My approach to teaching *The Concealed Fancies* centers around the question of identity: how do the characters (and the playwrights) present themselves through dress, speech, and behavior, and how is this related to early modern norms? Therefore, the

historical context, representation of female agency, and meta-theatricality garner attention. Depending on the instructor's approach and area of expertise, as well as the course focus, one of these threads may warrant more consideration than the others. Yet, all three are interrelated in important ways.

To begin with, Cavendish and Brackley wrote *The Concealed Fancies* circa 1645, during the Civil War. The political and social instability of the milieu permeates the play. In 1644, the playwrights' father, the Marquis (later Duke) of Newcastle, had suffered an embarrassing loss at Marston Moor and fled to the Continent with his sons, leaving his daughters behind. While in France, Newcastle met Margaret Lucas, who was serving Henrietta Maria in her exile. As Lady Tranquility likely represents Lucas and Calsindow represents Newcastle—the absent patriarch—the disruption of the two characters' marriage hints that *The Concealed Fancies* predates the union of Newcastle and Lucas in December of 1645. From the contemporaneous strain between Charles I and Parliament, the period of Personal Rule, and the conflict between Royalists and Parliamentarians, the instructor might address the events that underpin the war to provide a historical lens through which students can begin to read *The Concealed Fancies*. Framing the socio-political context of the play enables deeper student understanding of what is at stake for the playwrights and the characters they create. With particular regard to the seizure of Ballamo castle in the play, the Cavendish sisters' geo-political reality becomes significant. With their father and brothers in exile, Cavendish and

Brackley lived at Welbeck Abbey when it was captured by Parliamentarian forces. Like the cousins at Ballamo, the sisters remained there and Cavendish assumed a managerial role, protecting her father's estate as best she could.

Thanks to patriarchal absences during the Civil War, many women gained agency. Class and gender boundaries come under scrutiny in times of war, and *The Concealed Fancies* underscores how these boundaries are threatened (Liddy 84). Set against a wartime backdrop, the heroines question male authority, principally in courtship and marriage. However, female agency is not uniformly asserted: Luceny and Tattiney also occupy normative roles—daughter, sister, wife—and, similar to their cousins, passively await male “rescue” after the capture of Ballamo. These complexities render the play appealing, as burgeoning female authority appears in this remarkable (though unpublished in its time) contribution to female authorship. Even as the Cavendish sisters' interest in gendered power relations enables the instructor to model a biographical reading, it also supports discussion of proto-feminism and the emergence of the professional woman writer in Restoration England. Following *The Concealed Fancies* with Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, which similarly alludes to the managerial role that some women occupied during (and following) the Civil War, as well as Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* or *The Rover* is ideal. Not only do these texts reinforce the socio-political and economic impact of war, but, analogous to the Cavendish sisters' play, they proffer fruitful questions regarding female agency.

The Concealed Fancies is an important text to highlight in a survey course because it is “the first female-authored drama to positively highlight the potential of performance-based identity for female characters” (Acheson 9). The awareness of role-play that pervades *The Concealed Fancies* connects to the self-referential characters that the playwrights create (Luceny and Tattiney represent Cavendish and Brackley, respectively). In the play, the Cavendish sisters frame a heightened awareness of self-presentation in terms of theatrical performance, especially for the heroines and their cousins at Ballamo. Turning the world into a stage, the playwrights “intimat[e] that courtship and marriage are more like ritualised performances in which men as well as women act their parts” (Liddy 73). Two scenes in particular —I.iv and III.iv— stress the scripting, rehearsal, and reflection that feed into the female characters’ behavior. These scenes also invite consideration of meta-theatre. What does the emphasis on staged performances of the self indicate about theatrical artifice? In addition, how do the tricks of Courtley and Presumption contribute to the meta-theatricality via the play-within-a-play device? By provoking questions about meta-theatricality and self-presentation, *The Concealed Fancies* sets up analysis of early modern theatrical conventions and dramatic genre. This is significant considering that it was written following the “golden age” of drama, during the playhouse closures (1642-1660).

Study of *The Concealed Fancies* begs for consideration of genre. Catherine Burroughs suggests that the play “resists generic labels even as it meets the criteria for

several forms" (21). First outlining the features of comedy and then promoting investigation of how they manifest in *The Concealed Fancies* works well in a first-year course, and group discussion focused on generic elements can translate into formal assignments. To minimize the "sage on the stage" approach, short student presentations can attend to play structure and set up dialogue regarding the Cavendish sisters' adherence to or deviation from comedic conventions. A short essay assignment that asks students to examine how generic features operate in the play similarly promotes close reading and, potentially, the application of secondary material. For instance, if time permits, I suggest placing *The Concealed Fancies* alongside Aristotle's *Poetics*, Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesie* and Francis Bacon's "On masques" to unpack generic boundaries. Looking beyond comedy, instructors might encourage students to examine what elements of other genres are discernible. In what ways is *The Concealed Fancies* a tragicomedy? Where do we see the Jonsonian masque appear? Finally, could the play be categorized as a closet drama?^[1] Discussing the malleability and slipperiness of genre may be more suitable for upper-year students whose earlier studies enable them to grapple with more complex questioning of models. Nonetheless, instructors can certainly alert first-year students to generic issues, and *The Concealed Fancies* pointedly facilitates consideration of such important questions.

A Note on the Text

Though *The Concealed Fancies* does not appear in the standard survey-course anthologies produced by Norton or Broadview, it is published in full in S.P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies' *Renaissance Drama by Women: Texts and Documents* and could be included in a course package. The prose and songs of *The Concealed Fancies* are not dense, and a brief editorial introduction and endnotes support student understanding of unfamiliar terms, as well as the context from which the text emerges.

Endnotes

[1] In line with Marta Straznicky, I position *The Concealed Fancies* within the household dramatic mode, a subgenre which requires further attention.

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