

In and Out of the Closet : New Perspectives on Early Modern Closet Drama

International Conference

**Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris
25-26 November 2022**

This two-day conference seeks to offer fresh perspectives on early modern closet drama by interrogating its cultural and historical specificities as well as its inscription within the theatrical productions of early modern Europe as a whole.

The phrase ‘closet drama’ was coined in the nineteenth century to refer to plays that were not performed, or designed to be performed, on a public stage. In early modern England, it has most notably been used to refer to a body of neo-Senecan tragedies often influenced by the works of the French dramatist Robert Garnier, beginning with Mary Sidney Herbert’s *Antonius* (1592) and ending with Elizabeth Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam* (1613). Other well-known examples are Samuel Daniel’s *Cleopatra* (1594) and *Philotas* (1604), Thomas Kyd’s *Cornelia* (1594, a translation of Robert Garnier’s 1574 tragedy), Fulke Greville’s *Mustapha* (1596) and *Alaham* (1601). Moreover, the phrase can apply to other plays and theatrical subgenres, in particular pastoral drama, a notable example being Lady Mary Wroth’s *Love’s Victory* (written around 1619). The closure of the theatres during the Civil War also forced Margaret Cavendish and John Milton to compose plays that were not necessarily designed for public performance, namely *Samson Agonistes* (1671) and Cavendish’s two volumes of printed plays (1662; 1668). Whether a constraint or a choice, the conception of such plays is intrinsically correlated with the political and cultural context in which they were written: closet drama may have enabled authors to voice controversial content while benefiting from the shelter of the private space in which they were produced.

These plays, usually brought together under the heading ‘closet drama’, were composed at home and destined for private use, in contradistinction with commercial theatres like the Globe, which used professional companies to perform in front of a socially hybrid, paying audience. The development of closet drama is thus sometimes seen as a reaction against the commercial theatres, providing an apparently elitist response to what would be the latter’s crowd-pleasing tendencies. Yet the distinction between closet drama and public theatres may be overrated, as it emphasises their social and aesthetic differences to the point of erasing any potential similarities or communications. For instance, Shakespeare was probably aware of Mary Sidney Herbert’s *Antonius* when he wrote *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607). Examining the contiguity between closet drama and commercial theatres is all the more important as the sources of closet drama are often derived from Continental theatre, in particular the plays of Robert Garnier, which were performed in public in France. The sources of closet drama and the ways in which they were appropriated could thus be further explored. Some of the themes, historical subjects and characters developed in closet drama are also similar to those of other Continental plays: for instance, the story of Mariam and Herod, tackled by Elizabeth Cary, was also the subject matter of at least four plays on the Continent. If the specificities of closet drama must not be overlooked, they, in turn, must not obscure any potential dialogue between plays or perhaps even their circulation within Europe.

Was the corpus of closet drama constituted in conscious opposition with the commercial theatres, as a substitute destined to deeply renew a popular genre (as Line Cottagnies suggests about *Antonius*), or could it have provided authors with a side entrance to either the world of commercial theatres, or that of court entertainments ? Comparisons could be drawn between closet drama and another self-consciously elitist genre that pitted itself against public theatres:

that of the Masque – at least one author of closet dramas, Samuel Daniel, also wrote successful Masques, and Mary Sidney Herbert’s prominent figure at court probably ensured her attendance to some of them (her niece Mary Wroth also participated in Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones’s *Masque of Blackness* in 1605). In both cases – though in different ways – women took a more active part than in the commercial theatres, either as performers (though silent ones in the Masque) or as playwrights in closet drama.

Although (or maybe because) they were confidential for long, the renewed critical interest in these plays is attested by new editions of various plays that are either published or under way. We would, therefore, like to investigate the challenges closet drama poses to modern editors. Furthermore, some recent stagings invite us to rediscover the dramaturgical potential of these plays. They also invite us to wonder about the dramatic and poetic specificities of closet drama – beyond its characteristically long monologues and soliloquies – and ask whether or not they could justify its distinction from the wider early modern theatrical corpus, or alternatively prove that this distinction is a later critical construct. Finally, the conference might also examine the contemporary resonances of these plays.

We welcome contributions on early modern closet drama that will address - but are not limited to - the following topics:

- Genre, sources, intertextuality and European drama ;
- History of the theatre; antitheatricality, links to other theatrical forms (court entertainment, pastoral drama, academic drama);
- Form (rhetorical performance vs bodily performance, argument vs action, sententiae) and themes (Roman history, politics, family, ethics);
- the representation and/ or questioning of gender in these plays;
- women’s involvement in closet drama;
- Didacticism ; education ; play-reading;
- Publication ; unstaged drama ; censorship ;
- From the page to the stage : stageability; staged readings; contemporary university drama.

Confirmed keynote speaker: Ramona Wray (Queen’s University Belfast)

A selection of the papers will form the basis of an edited collection submitted to an international academic publisher. The conference will take place in Paris, in the heart of the Latin Quarter, but video conferences will also be possible in case international travel restrictions still apply.

Contributors are invited to send their abstracts (300 words) together with a short bio to aurelie.griffin@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr and sophie.lemercier-goddard@ens-lyon.fr by 30 June. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by 15 July.

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