Introduction

Closet plays by early modern women are inherently dichotomous: in appearance they resemble stage plays but were never professionally performed, they are the products of aristocratic leisure but are permeated with the traditions of commercial drama, they are charged with political purpose but their reception has no apparent bearing on the exercise of power. These dichotomies are specific indications of the division between private and public spheres that structured the contexts within which early modern women wrote drama and in which they were read, but they also undermine the stability of that division. A play that is not intended for commercial performance can nevertheless cross between private playreading and the public sphere through the medium of print; a woman writer can use the elite genre of closet drama to engage in political discourse without exposing her views to an indiscriminate public; current political issues can be given dramatic treatment within the confines of a private household; a woman can avoid public censure by insisting that her play not be staged while also issuing it in print. Each of these scenarios corresponds to the specific contexts of the plays discussed in this book and will therefore be examined in detail, but a more general point should be drawn at the outset: the closet play – as discursive formation and as material object – is situated in a cultural field in which private and public are shifting rather than fixed points of reference. The private household in which a play may be read is also the locus of social and political networks, the medium of print is both more and less public than commercial performance, and manipulations of print and manuscript format enable the woman writer to address a readership that is selectively public or private. Early modern women's closet plays, then, are not intrinsically "private" texts. But while they are positioned between private and public modes of reception, shifting their axis in response to the social and intellectual pressures of a particular historical moment, they are also variously marked by gestures of detachment and exclusion (some use elite discourses and presentational modes, others

explicitly reject commercial performance, still others validate interiority as the preferred site of dramatic experience) that reinforce the author's stake in something *other than* an openly public mode.

In examining early modern women's closet plays in relation to the cultural field represented by the concept of privacy, this book addresses two major issues that recent feminist scholarship identifies as vital to a revisionary history of these works: the nature and meaning of the opposition between closet and stage drama, and the political work of playreading.[1] The architectural references underlying the terms "closet" and "stage" resonate with the seemingly intuitive distinction between "private" and "public" plays, plays that are explicitly intended for commercial performance and those that aim to be viewed only in the closed domestic spaces (bedchambers, libraries, closets) which are the most common sites of recreational reading in the early modern period.[2] This dichotomy has been trenchantly challenged by literary and performance critics who have argued that the "closet" designation for early modern women's plays is not only anachronistic but erroneous in that it implicitly disparages non-commercial performance contexts (such as reading aloud, household drama, or academic production) to which the supposedly "closet" plays can be successfully accommodated.[3] In shifting attention from the formal qualities of closet drama to the extrinsic circumstances that have either prevented or facilitated their performance, these critics have shown that early modern women's plays are not inherently unperformable and cannot, therefore, be held in fixed opposition to the public stage.

The boundary between public stage and private closet has also been reconceptualized by critics who have stressed the association between playreading and political dissent in the early modern period, particularly in relation to the Sidnean closet drama. Drawing together the example of continental playwrights such as Robert Garnier, whose plays were recognized vehicles of political commentary, the practice of analogical reading, and the association between print and the public sphere, feminist scholars have demonstrated that women's closet plays were explicitly engaged with contemporary political and philosophical debates.[4] By extension, the domestic contexts in which early modern women's plays were written and read have themselves been reevaluated as sites of social activity rather than withdrawal or solitary retreat.[5]

The crossover between closet drama, political discourse, and performance traditions has led, then, to a transformation in the way that early modern women's closet plays are understood as "private" works. At the same time, however, in the endeavor to position closet drama within political and

even theatrical culture, feminist scholarship has not so much redrawn as collapsed the boundaries between public and private. What began as a critique of the assumptions and biases underlying the disparagement of a "private" closet drama has reaffirmed – rather than interrogated – the cultural supremacy of the same "public" modes (stage performance and political discourse) which marginalized women in the first place. Thus, bringing early modern women's closet plays to the stage is understood not as an alternative to the activities of domestic playreading or private performance but as the culmination of a struggle into public voice, "a final swing of the prison door" that alone bestows the "full and open" appreciation these writers deserve.[6] Similarly, recognizing the political content of women's closet plays has led to a disparagement of the very intellectual traditions – "mere" academic writing and playreading – that fostered these plays to begin with.[7] The subversion of the private sphere within the interpretive framework has thus obscured the traces of *difference* between women's closet plays and the public theatre, a difference that is, I will argue, essential to understanding the cultural position of closet drama and its accommodation of female authorship.

Neutralizing the concept and material condition of privacy leaves a crucial question unanswered: Why did early modern women dramatists explicitly write plays for reading (even if they also envisioned performance)? Why were the traditions of playreading – whether scholarly, recreational, or philosophical – hospitable to female authorship when women were so successfully barred from commercial drama? And why did women continue to write plays for readers even after the professional theatre began to stage their work? These questions point towards alternative models of playwriting that bear a different relationship to gender than does professional dramatic authorship. That difference, I will be arguing, is possible because closet drama – unlike commercial theatre – focuses the tensions and points of contact between public and private realms in a way that simultaneously involves retreat and engagement in public culture. It seems to me essential, therefore, that the category of privacy be retained in approaching early modern women's closet plays, and that it be understood not as a fixed social position, an a priori impediment to full participation in the public sphere, but rather as a tactical construct which was itself the condition of possibility for women's playwriting.[8]

To uncover women's specific use of a strategically private authorial position it is necessary to recognize the fraught meaning of "private" drama in early modern theatrical and literary culture generally. My first chapter examines the use of this term in the overlapping discourses of play

publishing and antitheatricality to provide a new framework for understanding closet drama as part of a larger cultural matrix in which closed spaces, select interpretive communities, and political dissent are aligned. This framework also reveals that private space can be construed as the site of theatrical display, both literally and metaphorically, and that playreading in turn intersects with social and political economies. Most importantly, the crossover between closet and stage, between solitary reading and political engagement, between print and performance reveals the *adaptability* of privacy to a variety of social, political, and economic agendas. Within such a framework, the "private" nature of women's closet drama can be analyzed in terms of agency as well as constraint.

The following four chapters look at the specific ways in which privacy, both as a condition and as a concept, shapes the writing and reading of plays by individual female dramatists. Chapter 2 places Jane Lumley's translation of Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Aulis* (c. 1553) in the context of humanist translation and playreading practices and argues that the domestic setting of her education paradoxically enabled a radical departure from academic models. Lumley's play rejects every principle of humanist translation: the intricate verse forms of the original are transformed into a casual English prose, the narrative is selectively focused around the issue of parental responsibility, and the design of the manuscript suggests an interest in oral performance rather than rhetorical study. Lumley's *Iphigeneia* thus reveals the conditions of women's access to the most advanced forms of literary scholarship in the mid-sixteenth century, but also the possibility of transforming humanist theories and methodologies of reading into acts of writing that surpass the boundaries of literacy imposed upon women by Tudor educational theorists.

Detailed attention to Lumley's manuscript puts into question the relationship between the format of plays and privacy, an issue that is directly addressed in the following chapter on Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedie of Mariam* (1613). Cary's play belongs to a group of neo-classical closet dramas that are self-consciously positioned within an elite literary culture. This chapter examines *Mariam* in terms of the political nuances of closet drama, both in their content and in the manner of their publication, and considers the deliberate sense in which they were presented to a select reading public as the products of a private coterie. Interestingly, the publication of "private" theatre plays in the early seventeenth century draws on the same political and intellectual values as contemporary closet drama. By examining the layout and marketing of both types of play, Cary's work emerges as a knowing deployment of a literary style that is *already* coded as "private."

Chapter 4 relates the plays of Margaret Cavendish (1662 and 1668) to developments in playreading practices occasioned by the closure of the public theatres in 1642. Under a regime that criminalized public performance, the writing, printing, and reading of plays became conspicuously political. At the same time, the format of published plays began to represent the theatrical illusion in a way that enabled the reader to engage with drama in the theatre of the mind. The many closet plays published between 1642 and 1660 exhibit these representational strategies most fully and reveal that Cavendish's seemingly antitheatrical works were in fact based on a new conception of drama as interface between the public and private spheres.

In chapter 5 I extend the study of women's closet drama into the Restoration to examine the ways in which conceptions of privacy continued to facilitate the writing of plays by women even after commercial performance became possible. Ironically, it is only in this later period that a woman dramatist explicitly states that her plays are not intended for the stage, a paradox that can be explained by the oppressive conditions of commercial playwriting for women and the resultant validation of private modes of authorship and circulation. Like the other writers examined in this book, Anne Finch was directly involved in public theatre as both playgoer and author of occasional verse, but she emphatically denounces stage presentation for her plays. By erecting a firm boundary between public theatre and private playreading, Finch sought to define herself as an amateur writer and thereby circumvent certain stigmas that attended the professionalization of women dramatists.

Because she differentiates herself so strictly from women who write for money, Finch more clearly than any of the other playwrights examined in this book focuses the question of privacy and closet drama around the issue of class. These writers belong, not incidentally, to the social and political elite of their time, a fact that even further complicates their orchestration of private modes of writing and self-presentation. Although my study does not focus consistently on the issue of class, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that the positive value of privacy in this period is determined by notions of social, political, and economic exclusion. While such notions can of course be exploited by individuals across the social spectrum, in the case of female dramatists they seem to have been particularly class specific: closet drama is fundamentally an elite drama, impossible to dissociate from a cultural literacy that is in no sense part of the public domain. For this reason, it is important to recognize that the four writers examined in this book, although together they span something apparently unified by the term "early modern," do not constitute anything like a tradition

of female playwriting. Each of them was, in a fundamental sense, a self-starter, having perhaps the crucial support of her immediate family, but writing drama without any sense of continuing in a line of specifically female authorship. Rather than demonstrating a continuity in women's playwriting, these closet plays in fact underscore the great distance, both temporal and intellectual, between incidents of female dramatic authorship before the Restoration. What they have in common is their being *plays* in a culture of *reading*, and it is to the specific relationship of gender to this culture that we must therefore turn if we want to know not why so few plays were written by women, but why these few were written at all.

CHAPTER 1

Privacy, playreading, and performance

In order to map the social and cultural pragmatics of a "private" form of dramatic writing, it is necessary to interrogate the seemingly intuitive opposition between reading and seeing a play in performance. Privacy, understood as a construct rather than a social fact, permeates theatrical discourse in early modern England: it is used in marketing published plays, in the promotional tactics of theatre companies, in antitheatrical polemics, in the self-presentation of authors and audiences. As this chapter will demonstrate, privacy in these contexts – as in the context of playreading – is invariably associated with notions of exclusion, privilege, and autonomy, a set of social and cultural preferences that both registers and subordinates the spatial dimension (indoors, closed, restricted) upon which it rests. It is in its selective identification of privacy with a specific conception of space that early modern theatrical discourse resists the polarization of playreading and public playgoing.

The designation of certain public theatres as "private" venues can be fairly precisely linked with the growing stratification of the playgoing public in the early seventeenth century.[1] With the reopening of the Blackfriars theatre in 1599, and the accompanying need for developing a distinction between kinds of theatrical experience, fewer and fewer published plays are linked explicitly with "public" venues. By the 1630s such designations have practically disappeared and, in nearly inverse proportion, the "private House" pedigree is almost ubiquitous.[2] To complicate matters further, references to public performances in this later period refer, paradoxically, to what we are accustomed to calling the private playhouses. Henry Shirley's *The Martyr'd Souldier* (1638), for instance, is printed "As it was sundry times Acted with a generall applause at the Private house in Drury lane, and at other publicke Theatres." The "public" theatre and the "private" playhouse are here complementary terms, suggesting that "public" has acquired the more restricted meaning of "commercial," regardless of the venue. This shift is also found on title pages linking the playtext with a court performance,

where this is invariably considered "private" and any subsequent commercial production is by default "public." Lodowick Carlell's *The Deserving favorite* (1629) is said to have been "Acted, first before the Kings Majestie, and since publikely at the BLACK-FRIERS": a rare but telling instance of the "private" nature of the Blackfriars being elided.

However limited the evidence of title pages alone may be, it seems worth considering that the growing marketability of "private" drama parallels the increasing interest in modes of privacy (social, architectural, intellectual) evident in the early modern period generally, and it is this larger context that can help explain what was thought to be "private" about theatres that accommodated as many as 700 paying spectators.[3] A much-cited passage in John Marston's *Jacke Drums Entertainment* (1601) makes the crucial distinction: attending the Children of Paul's plays is preferred because there "A man shall not be choakte / With the stench of Garlicke, nor be pasted / To the barmy Jacket of a Beer-brewer."[4] Marston's distinction between private and public audiences is fundamentally about status, but it is represented in terms of the body. The "good gentle Audience" at the children's plays are not subjected to one another's offensive odors nor do they come into contact with the unwashed; rather than being "choakte" by and "pasted" to their neighbors their bodies are separate and untouched. To extend Marston's terms somewhat, "open" theatres imply "open" bodies, in other words, are sites where physical boundaries between spectators are dangerously and offensively permeable; "closed" theatres, by contrast, secure those boundaries and literally protect the integrity of the theatre-going subject.

In light of this association between "open" theatres and bodily corruption it is not surprising that opponents of the public theatres would remedy the playgoing "disease" with a kind of quarantine, a therapeutic regime that was also institutionalized in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century plague-orders.[5] "Let us but shut up our ears," advises Stephen Gosson in *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), "pull our feet back from resort to theatres, and turn away our eyes from beholding of vanity," and in a later tract he urges his readers: "Enter every one into your selves."[6] Here the corrupt, open body of the playgoer is refigured as a closed site. Moreover, the closed body of the reformed spectator is positioned within spaces that are clearly delineated as private and domestic: one's house or rooms for those who refrain altogether from the theatrical, or, where some interest in theatre is likely to continue, the study or closet, domestic spaces in which plays can be read but which preclude the harmful physical conditions of the "public" theatres. William Prynne, for example, gives the following as a rationale for permitting the reading of playbooks: "Stage-plays may be privately read

over without any danger of infection by ill company, without any public infamy or scandal, without giving any ill example."[7] "When a man reads a Play," he continues,

> he ever wants that *viva voce*, that flexanimous rhetorical Stage-elocution, that lively action and representation of the Players themselves which put life and vigor into these their Interludes, and make them pierce more deeply into the Spectators' eyes, their ears and lewd affections.[8]

Not only does private playreading secure corporeal boundaries, it also enables the subject to "pass by all obscene or amorous passages, all prophane or scurrill Jests, all heathenish oaths and execrations," thus restoring moral control over the theatrical illusion. "[No] such liberty," claims Prynne, is available to spectators who are by contrast vulnerable to all forms of contagion.[9]

Closed bodies, private spaces, and the exercise of an independent critical intelligence are all associated by Prynne with playreading and are framed in opposition to the collective event of public playgoing. Interestingly, these same qualities emerge in descriptions of the "private" commercial theatre, although Prynne for one was well aware that this label was a marketing fiction. The physical discomforts of attending the hall theatres focus on the "gentleman-like smell" of tobacco, an up-market odor compared with the garlic and onion of the "stinkards" at the amphitheatres.[10] Hall theatre spectators are described in terms of clothing rather than bodies – brightly colored taffeta, starched ruffs, generously cut cloaks, wide-brimmed, feathered hats, bulky if gorgeous outfits that interfere with sight lines and buffer one body from the next. More importantly, the critical faculties of playgoers begin to concern playwrights far more than rude conduct. Francis Beaumont, for instance, figures the Blackfriars theatre as a court where "a thousand men in judgement sit," a crowd, to be sure, but one that is daunting for the number of critical minds at work rather than for the throng of a massive, collective body.[11] By contrast, it is precisely this kind of crowd that John Tatham in 1640 identifies with the Fortune theatre: "Rables, Applewives and Chimney-boyes, / Whose shrill confused Ecchoes loud doe cry, / Enlarge your Commons, We hate Privacie."[12]

In practice, of course, as to the minds of those with antitheatrical prejudices, the bodies of playgoers at the private theatres were no more secure than at the public venues (witness the numerous references to pickpocketing, prostitution, and sexual touching),[13] and the crowds of spectators posed the same moral and health hazards. The residents of Blackfriars, for example, were not deceived by Burbage's proposal to build a "private"

theatre in their precinct. In their petition protesting what they insist on calling the "common Playhouse," they warn of the very same conditions that civic authorities feared of the amphitheatres. No wonder the King's Men, once they were granted permission to perform at Blackfriars, were keen to portray their style of theatre as "private" in spite of its frankly commercial aspect.[14] The closed space of the hall theatre, it might be said, was an overdetermined site for a cultural practice that sought to dissociate itself from the "public."

The use of the concept of privacy in theatrical discourse complicates the sense in which we can think of playreading as a distinctly "private" activity. Indeed, there are very few plays of any kind which situate reading in a space that is explicitly closed and/or domestic, be it within a closet, a study, a bedchamber, or a library, and even those that do are not concerned thereby to distinguish between playreading and playgoing per se. Perhaps the best known such example is from *The Roaring Girle* (1611), in which Middleton assures "the Comicke, Play-readers" that the published play is "good to keepe you in an afternoone from dice, at home in your chambers," but also that, like the real Moll Cutpurse, it may pass freely between the theatre and the bedchamber: the "book . . . may bee allowed both Gallery roome at the play-house, and chamber-roome at your lodging."[15] Conflating the playbook with its sexualized transvestite heroine in effect collapses the distinction antitheatrical writers like Prynne would want to maintain between the lascivious public theatre and the chaste private chamber. But even plays that do represent the private space of playreading in opposition to public theatre do not necessarily oppose reading to performance. Robert Wilmot's *The Tragedie of Tancred and Gismund* (1591), "Newly revived and polished" for a readership, has an author's preface advising that the play "contein her selfe within the walles of your house" in order to elude "the Tragedian Tyrants of our time;"[16] similarly, a dedicatory poem to Thomas Randolph's *The Jealous Lovers* (1632) would have the play "impaled lie / Within the walls of some great librarie" rather than making it "publick."[17] Both of these plays, however, were originally performed in literally private theatres, *Tancred and Gismund* by students at the Inner Temple for Queen Elizabeth, and *The Jealous Lovers* at Trinity College Cambridge before the court of Charles I, so that the desire to contain them "within the walles" of domestic space is not so much a conferral of privacy on the act of playreading as an attempt to preserve the plays' prior status as elite theatricals and thereby distinguish them from "the vulgar peoples sport."[18] We find here an association, then, between domestic playreading and the courtly or academic stage, with all three venues belonging to an