

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***The Unnatural Tragedy* by Margaret Cavendish, presented by the British American Drama Academy at Ovalhouse, London, 10 December 2014 (dress rehearsal)**

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Directed by Graham Watts. Designed by Neil Irish and Laura Cordery.

This production, undertaken with American student actors, probably represents the first time that *The Unnatural Tragedy* has been heard since group readings aloud were organized in the aristocratic drawing rooms of seventeenth-century England and the Low Countries. Be that as it may, the Ovalhouse performance made good use of modern dress to bring out the sort of social satire that certainly was intended by Margaret Cavendish. The decision to costume the apparently innocent Sociable Virgins in English schoolgirl uniforms was a wonderful audience pleaser, as was the opening scene in which two male characters (Frere and his friend) were decked out for a beach party complete with beer cans, loose-fitting floral shirts, and Bermuda shorts. Music and dance came into play when the Sociable Virgins evoked a night-club scene in conjunction with other characters, including Frere and his friend, to create an atmosphere of youthful abandon. This mix of characters was not in the original script, but it definitely reinforced the light and witty feeling written in to the first part of the play.

The incest plot, which radically shifts this mood, is probably more difficult for a modern audience to understand. The brother and sister, Frere and Soeur, have been separated from an early age and the brother, in particular, is strongly attracted to his sibling in a sexual way. As Karen Raber has noted, this kind of attraction has been studied by modern-day anthropologists and found to be surprisingly frequent.<sup>1</sup> Some in

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<sup>1</sup>Karen Raber, 'The Unnatural Tragedy and Familial Absolutisms', in *Cavendish and Shakespeare: Interconnections*, ed. by Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 184.

the audience would have known that. What they probably would not have known is that because many families were separated during the English Civil Wars, there may have been frequent actual cases of incestuous desire in Cavendish's time. Her script, perhaps based on what she knew from observation or report, concentrates on the agony of Frere as he battles his desire. The student actor who took the part captured this agony with admirable subtlety and nuance. The switch from agonizing lover to rapist and murderer does not work as realism in the script and probably would have been recognized by Cavendish's early readers (silent and aloud) as the genre of romance. Frere in the role of rapist and murderer is more like Shakespeare's fiendish Antiochus (an incestuous father) in the romance *Pericles Prince of Tyre* than a recognizable human being. *Pericles*, itself, is a difficult play for modern audiences to grasp and is not often performed these days.

Watts had a good deal of fun putting together much of the production, even giving a comic edge to some of the more serious relationships. When we meet Monsieur Sensible, for instance, we find that the white actor has a fine southern American accent, an accent that recalls Rhett Butler from *Gone with the Wind*. This accent in itself elicited giggles in the audience at the Ovalhouse theatre. When, later, the Ovalhouse audience saw that Sensible's daughter, Amor, was African-American, giggles turned to open laughter. 'Colour-blind' casting can reap wonderful social satire on occasion, and I, at least, was put in mind of the film *Jefferson in Paris* about the American President Thomas Jefferson and the children that he had by his slave Sally Hemings. There also was a distinct sense of serious social satire on present-day upper-class ethics in the unashamedly 'me first' Madam Malateste, who begins the play as one of the seemingly innocent Sociable Virgins. The word 'virgin' is deeply ironic when applied to this scheming and callous woman. She is, of course, honest about her motives, but that honesty only connects her with asides spoken by characters like Richard III and Iago.

*The Unnatural Tragedy* is a play that bears seeing more than once, for it has any number of tricky spots. What does one do, for instance, with the dying words of the rapist and murderer who echoes the heroic Cleopatra from Shakespeare's Romano-Egyptian tragedy? Frere says, 'I come, my mistress, wife, and sister, all in one' just before he kills himself. If Cavendish is being serious, as I think she is, what is her exact sense of the brother-sister relationship as the play comes to an end? And what would the audience's dominant reaction have been in her day? Anger? Disgust? Pity? Empathy?