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Angry Wives in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy Of Mariam: The Fair Queen Of Jewry*¹

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Abstract

Set in 29 B.C., *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613) is the first original play by a woman to be published in England. The forerunner of feminist drama, Elizabeth Cary attacks the commonly held assumption that anger, a sign of rebellion, is socially unacceptable for women. Cary's female characters violate their submissive roles by expressing anger at their husbands. Mariam, the Queen of Jewry, confesses in her soliloquy that she detests her husband Herod the Great, who murdered her brother and grandfather. Herod's sister, Salome, on the other hand, asks her husband for a divorce at a time when only men could legally end marriage. Salome challenges traditional female roles as well as racial stereotypes by taking an Arab lover. Instead of taking collective action to claim their legal rights, women support male dominance by oppressing other women on the grounds of class, race, and feminine virtue: Herod's ex-wife blames Mariam for stealing her husband; Mariam belittles "half-Jewish" Salome; Salome plots Mariam's death by falsely accusing her of being unfaithful to Herod. The play, then, does not idealize the angry wives, who rebel against their imprisonment in marriage. While Herod's anger results with the execution of Mariam, women's hostility toward one another endorses gender, racial, and religious discrimination. In the absence of a supportive network among women, their anger cannot change sexual politics, but instead only serves to uphold the prevailing social order based on sexual and racial inequality. Ironically, the public regards not Herod, but Salome a murderer for plotting the deaths of Mariam and her husband. The play serves as a critique of gender inequality in early modern England that justifies male violence but regards women's outspokenness a crime.

Keywords: Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Salome, feminism, women, anger

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Elizabeth Cary'nin *The Tragedy of Mariam: The Fair Queen of Jewry* Adlı Oyununda Kadın ve Öfke

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Özet

MÖ 29 yılında geçen *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613) İngiltere’de bir kadın yazar tarafından yayımlanan ilk orijinal oyundur. Feminist tiyatronun öncüsü olan Cary, toplumda başkaldırmanın sembolü olan öfkenin sadece erkeklere özgü olduğu ve kadınların hep sessiz ve uysal olmaları gerektiği kanısını eleştirir. Cary’nin kadın karakterleri—Yahudilerin kraliçesi Mariam ve görünce Salome—kocalarına itaat etmeyi bırakıp onlara karşı duydukları nefreti açıkça dile getirirler. Örneğin, Mariam savaşta hayatını kaybettiğini düşündüğü kocası Kral Herod’un yasını tutmaz ve sahnede yalnızken kardeşi ve dedesini öldürmüş olan kocasına adeta kin kusar. Herod’un kardeşi Salome ise kadınların kanunen boşanma hakkı olmadığı bir dönemde kocasına onu aldattığını ve ayrılmak istediğini korkusuzca söyler. Bir Arap sevgilisinin olduğunu itiraf ederek toplumdaki ırkçılığa ve geleneksel kadın rollerine karşı çıkar. Fakat birlik olup toplumda kadın hakları için savaşmak yerine karakterler birbirlerini sınıf, ırk ve namus üzerinden yargılayıp ezerler: Kral Herod’un eski karısı Mariam’ı kocasını çalmakla suçlar; Mariam yarı Yahudi olan Salome’yi melez bir hayvana benzeter. Gururu incinen Salome, intikam almak için Mariam’ın kocasını aldattığı ve zehirlemeye çalıştığı masalını uydurur ve böylece kıskanç Herod’un karısını öldürmesine sebep olur. Oyun, öfkeyi ataerki topluma yöneltmek yerine birbirlerini aşağılayan kadınların toplumdaki din, ırk ve cinsiyet rolleriyle ilgili önyargıları ne kadar beslediğini gösterir. Toplumun, karısını ve birçok düşmanını öldürmüş olan Kral Herod yerine öldürücü planlar yapan kardeşi Salome’yi aşağılık bir katil olarak dışlaması ironiktir. MÖ 29 yılında geçen bu oyun aslında 17. yüzyıl İngiltere’sinin bir yandan erkek şiddetini onaylarken diğer taraftan kadınların toplumda seslerini yükseltmelerini bir suç unsuru saydığını göstererek kadın erkek eşitsizliğine dikkat çeker.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Salome, feminizm, kadınlar, öfke

Introduction

Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639) was the first female British playwright to publish an original play during the reign of James I, when the literary sphere was primarily dominated by male writers. Nancy Cotton Pearse points out Cary's "extraordinary achievement" as a woman dramatist of the Renaissance: "Englishwomen before her had translated or adapted full-length plays by others, [...] but Cary was the first to construct her own plot and create her own characters."² Set in 29 B. C., *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613) was also the first play to depict the lives of the Jewish Queen Mariam and King Herod, who reigned over Judea, a region that was dominated by the Roman Empire. In their introduction to *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Barry Weller and Margaret Ferguson write: "In 39 B. C. Herod was appointed King of the Jews by the Romans, and, after a military campaign, took possession of Jerusalem and his throne in 37 B. C. He thus displaced Antigonus, the last ruler of the Maccabean, or Hasmonean, dynasty, to which Mariam, his second wife, and her family belonged."³ During the siege of Jerusalem, Herod killed Mariam's male relatives, who had a better claim to the throne, and asked his sister Salome's husband, Constabarus, to execute his enemies. Constabarus, however, concealed the supporters of Antigonus, the sons of Babas, who "might be helpful to him in subsequent changes of government."⁴ The play starts with Mariam's soliloquy upon hearing the false news that Caesar Augustus has killed Herod in Rome. When Herod surprisingly comes back home, he executes Constabarus for setting Babas' sons free, and Mariam for her presumed adultery. Drawing her material from Thomas Lodge's 1602 translation of Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*, Elizabeth Cary was courageous enough to publish a historical play at a time when writing was a male profession, and for this reason, she was described as an eccentric Catholic woman with masculine traits.⁵

² Nancy Cotton Pearse, "Elizabeth Cary, Renaissance Playwright," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 18.4 (1977): 601.

³ Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson, "Introduction," in *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry with The Lady Falkland: Her Life*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 63.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Elaine Beilin writes in "Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639): "The attribution of masculinity that has haunted Elizabeth Cary's intellectual achievements may explain why women so carefully guarded or apologized for their abilities. For many reasons, Cary—a scholar, dramatist, poet, religious polemicist, wife, and mother—encountered difficulties in practically every aspect of her life; a source of continual conflict was her attempt to live

As a married playwright who managed to balance her literary talents and domestic duties, Cary became the forerunner of feminist drama and questioned ideals of femininity in early modern England. With angry heroines trapped in marriage, Cary, as early as the 1600s, suggested that female roles of obedience and silence were not natural but socially determined. In “Anger and Insubordination,” Elizabeth Spelman argues that even as women are expected to be emotional, they are not allowed to express anger, which is a sign of rebellion against the prevailing social order. Although in rather different ways, Cary’s female characters—Mariam and her sister-in-law, Salome—violate their submissive roles by expressing anger at their husbands. Unable to mourn Herod’s presumed death, for example, Mariam confesses her long-time wish to see her despotic husband give his last breath. Herod’s sister, Salome, on the other hand, asks Constabarus for a divorce at a time when only men could legally end marriage. Instead of taking collective action to claim their legal rights, women support male dominance by oppressing other women on the grounds of class, race, and feminine virtue: Herod’s ex-wife, Doris, blames Mariam for stealing her husband; Mariam takes pride of her royal-blood and compares Salome to her servants. To take revenge on the scornful queen, Salome plots Mariam’s death by falsely accusing her of being unfaithful to Herod and of attempting to poison him with a love potion. Ironically, even Mariam’s mother, Alexandra, wants Mariam to be punished for shaming her family. While challenging traditional female roles of passivity and modesty, Cary’s play also shows how women contribute to male domination by suppressing other women.

Although Cary’s play is set in another time and place, the heroines’ rage against their entrapment in marriage speaks to British women’s suppressed anger concerning their limited roles as nurturers in the early seventeenth century. With James I’s 1603 speech to the Parliament, England was “invented” and “gendered” as the motherland to secure conventional female roles of virtue and domesticity: “What God hath conioyned then, let no man separate. I am the Husband, and all the whole Isle is my lawful Wife.”⁶ The King’s representation of England as his wife gave British women the responsibility to protect the nation’s moral foundations by serving as chaste and respectable mothers. As Anne McClintock argues, a community’s construction as a “familial and domestic space” depends “on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination

the ‘masculine’ life of the mind while devotedly carrying out the role and duties of a woman” (London: Routledge, 1998), 167.

⁶ Quoted in Karen Raber, “Gender and the political subject in The Tragedy of Mariam,” *Studies in English Literature* 35.2 (1995): 332.

of women and children within the domestic sphere.”⁷ The ideals of feminine virtue were naturalized as women became the ground upon which England’s degree of honor was measured. Women’s sexual desires were also domesticated with representations of sex as a utilitarian act and motherhood as the most sacred female duty. “A virtuous woman crowns her husband’s head,”⁸ Salome’s husband declares; he believes that adulterous women disgrace their family, race, and country. Since the queen’s fall from virtue signifies the fall of the nation, Herod executes Mariam for her (falsely assumed) affair with his counselor and restores his sovereignty as the absolute patriarch of ancient Palestine. With Salome’s and Mariam’s rebellion against their subservient positions in marriage, Cary hints at British women’s similar resistance to the rule of James I, who announced the divine rights of kings and supported male roles of authority and power.

Mariam’s anger at Herod:

Cary attacks the commonly held belief that women are essentially fragile, sensitive, and loving by starting her play with Mariam’s soliloquy expressing her anger at Herod, who had ordered her execution if he died in war. With her mixed feelings of “grief and joy” upon Herod’s death, the queen deviates from her duty to show unconditional love and devotion to her husband. Having internalized her wifely duties, she also blames herself for being “hard-hearted” and for disgracing the king by not grieving his death. The seemingly coy and delicate queen’s long-time wish to see Herod’s corpse and her secret joy at his slaughter in Rome suggest that anger is not reserved for men alone:

MARIAM. So at his death your eyes true drops did rain,
Whom dead, you did not wish alive again.
When Herod liv’d, that now is done to death,
Oft have I wish’d that I from him were free:
Oft have I wish’d that he might lose his breath,
Oft have I wish’d his carcass dead to see.⁹

⁷ Anne McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race and Nationalism,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 90-91.

⁸ Elizabeth Cary, “The Tragedy of Mariam,” in *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry with The Lady Falkland: Her Life*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), I. 6. 396.

⁹ Ibid., I. 1. 13-18.

With the repetition of “oft have I wish’d” in successive lines, Mariam emerges as a female agent conveying her socially unacceptable feelings of rage and scorn for her tyrannical husband. She privileges her personal interests over the nation by wishing for Herod’s death, which is her only way out of marriage. However, the Chorus, a “company of Jews,” advises Mariam to restrain her anger. Mariam’s violent and vengeful voice counters the Chorus’s belief that married women should not have “power as well as will.”¹⁰

At a time when women’s public speech was a threat to male authority, Mariam expresses her anger at Herod not only in her soliloquy but also in her conversation with Herod’s counselor, Sohemus, who spares her life after the king’s presumed death. She opens her heart to Sohemus and tells him that she would rather see the city burned or die disgracefully rather than hear the news of Herod’s return. The queen confesses to the counselor that she grieves Herod’s life more than his death, and declares her intention not to share her bed with the husband she profoundly hates:

MARIAM. I will not to his love be reconcil’d,
With solemn vows I have forsworn his bed.

SOHEMUS. But you must break those vows. [...]

MARIAM. I’ll rather break
The heart of Mariam. Cursed is my fate:
But speak no more to me, in vain ye speak
To live with him I so profoundly hate. [...]
And must I to my prison turn again? [...]
But now that curtain’s drawn from off my thought,
Hate doth appear again with visage grim:
And paints the face of Herod in my heart,
In horrid colours and detested look:¹¹

Her confidant Sohemus encourages Mariam to suppress her anger for Herod, who would not tolerate her defiance of wifely duties. “Unbridled speech is Mariam’s worst disgrace, / And will endanger her without desert,” Sohemus states, and it is her free speech that brings her downfall at the end of the play.¹² Indeed, Richard Brathwaite’s conduct book *The English Gentlewoman* (1631) advises women not to express themselves publicly: “bashful silence is an

¹⁰ Ibid., III. 3. 218.

¹¹ Ibid., III. 3. 132-160.

¹² Ibid., III. 3. 183.

ornament to their sex. [...] Modesty and honor require that in public a woman observe rather than discourse.”¹³ The Chorus too attributes silence to women by commenting that Mariam “wounds her honour” by speaking her mind to those other than her husband. Cary, however, gives voice to Mariam, who boldly challenges the myth of marriage as a happy-ever-after ending by comparing her house to prison.

The transformation of Mariam from a silent to an outspoken wife is evident upon Herod’s unexpected return. When Herod asks why she wears “dusky” and gloomy clothes, she boldly expresses her unhappiness in marriage: “My lord, I suit my garment to my mind, / And there no cheerful colours can I find.”¹⁴ As Mariam refuses to make love to Herod, he says that her bitter and hateful attitude will bring her downfall:

HEROD. This froward humour will not do you good:
It hath too much already Herod griev’d,
To think that you on terms of hate have stood.
Yet smile, my dearest Mariam, do but smile,
And I will all unkind conceits exile.

MARIAM. I cannot frame disguise, nor never taught
My face a look dissenting from my thought.¹⁵

Herod’s repetition of the word “smile” within the same line suggests how women are perceived as charming and carefree playthings for men, and are discouraged from expressing anger to their husbands. Spelman writes that “dominant groups wish to place limits on the kinds of emotional responses appropriate to those subordinate to them;”¹⁶ Herod attempts to maintain Mariam’s conformity to his decisions by insisting that she smile. However, Salome reveals Mariam’s inability to disguise her hate: “She speaks a beauteous language, but within / Her heart is false as powder.”¹⁷ She implies that Mariam has performed the role of a caring wife while resenting Herod for

¹³ Quoted in Ya-huei Wang, “Women’s Position in the Renaissance Period: The Case of *The Tragedy of Mariam*,” *Journal of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies* 1 (1) (2010): 2.

¹⁴ Cary, “*Mariam*,” IV. 3. 91-2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, IV. 3. 140-146.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Spelman, “Anger and Insubordination,” in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 270.

¹⁷ Cary, “*Mariam*,” IV. 7. 429-431.

her brother's death. In fact, even though Mariam knew of Herod's crimes before she married him, it is only after becoming the Queen of Jewry and bearing a successor to the throne that she dares to show anger to her husband.

Ironically, while expressing anger at her brother's murderer after several years of being married to him, Mariam does not even try to go against her death sentence. Herod deviates from his masculine role of rationality when he blindly believes Salome's tale that Mariam attempted to poison him with a love potion and fell in love with his counselor. Without even asking Salome for proof, Herod condemns Mariam as a fair-seeming "enchantress" with an "impure mind" and a "loathsome soul" for disgracing his family. When Herod asks Mariam why she fell in love with Sohemus, she calmly utters her last words to her husband: "They can tell / That say I lov'd him, Mariam says not so."¹⁸ She does not insist on her innocence or utter any other word to stop her execution. Her silence before death simultaneously casts her as a passive victim and indicates her choice of death over her imprisonment in marriage. On the verge of death, the queen publicly despises her murderous husband with her "dutiful though scornful smile."¹⁹ Her "cheerful face" suggests that she is content to end a life of pretense. Without any tears or cries for help, she refuses to play the role of a helpless and weak woman and instead dies proudly with a disdainful and mocking attitude towards Herod.

Salome speaks up for women's right to divorce:

While Mariam's defiance of Herod's authority is limited to her scornful smile before her execution, Salome fearlessly asks for a divorce from Constabarus so that she can marry Silleus, the chief minister of the king of Arabia. In her soliloquy, Salome complains that her Jewish society represses female desire by condemning premarital sex and by giving the right to divorce only to men. While Herod freely divorces Doris for Mariam, Salome has to suppress her passion for Silleus and endure her loveless marriage. Salome's cry for equal legal rights evokes how King Henry VIII of England (1509-1547) broke with the Roman Catholic Church to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn, while his subjects had very limited divorce rights.²⁰ For Salome, women, too, can fall out of love and break their marriage vows:

¹⁸ Ibid., IV. 4. 194.

¹⁹ Ibid. V. 1. 52.

²⁰ Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford state in *Women in Early Modern England*: "During the early modern period, wives were not permitted to initiate an action for divorce which allowed remarriage. Nor was divorce available to husbands, apart from a few wealthy peers who, after 1670, could secure a private act of Parliament to allow them to remarry" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 141.

SALOME. He loves, I love; what then can be the cause
 Keeps me [from] being the Arabian's wife?
 It is the principles of Moses' laws,
 For Constabarus still remains in life.
 If he to me did bear as earnest *hate*,
 As I to him, for him there were an ease;
 A separating bill might free his fate
 From such a yoke that did so much displease.
 Why should such privilege to man be given?
 Or given to them, why barr'd from women then?
 Are men than we in greater grace with Heaven?
Or cannot women hate as well as men?
 I'll be the custom-breaker: and begin
 To show my sex the freedom's door, [...].²¹

Cursing her “ill-fate” to be with Constabarus until death, Salome questions why only men have the right to hate and divorce their wives. “Are men than we in greater grace with Heaven?,” she asks and suggests that gender roles that endorse male dominance may not be God-given. In a society where men are the judges and lawgivers, Salome wants to alter the legal system to give women the right for divorce. She was quite ahead of her time in this thinking: this right was not legalized in England until 1857.

Salome becomes a “custom-breaker” by declaring her love for an Arab in a community that condemns interracial and extramarital relationships. When she boldly tells Constabarus that Silleus will take his room, Constabarus blames her for disgracing her race, country, and her family: “I blush for you, that have your blushing lost.”²² While judging his wife on the basis of feminine virtue, he also supports white supremacy by referring to Silleus as “a base Arabian.”

SALOME. To stop disgrace? [...]
 Thou shalt no hour longer call me wife,
 Thy jealousy procures my hate so deep:
 That I from thee do mean to free my life,
 By a divorcing bill before I sleep.

CONSTABARUS. Are Hebrew women now transformed to men?
 Why do you not as well our battles fight,

²¹ Cary, “Mariam,” I. 4. 297-310 (my emphasis).

²² Ibid., I. 6. 378.

And wear our armour?²³

Salome courageously defends her affair, which presumably disgraces her family. In the absence of divorce rights, she becomes a lawmaker by ordering her husband not to call her his wife. Ironically, Constabarus considers her desire to liberate herself from marriage unwomanly. As early as the 1600s, Cary portrayed how men became heroes for fighting for their nation while women were condemned for standing up for their legal rights.

Instead of fighting against divorce laws that privilege men, Salome finds an easier way out of marriage by plotting her husband's death. Salome promises to get Herod's consent for her brother Pheroras's marriage to a maid, and, in return, she asks Pheroras to tell the king that Constabarus disobeyed his order to execute his foes, the sons of Babas. Salome knows Herod would not be influenced by a woman, and, therefore, she uses a man's voice to manipulate the king: "This will be Constabarus' quick dispatch, / Which from my mouth would lesser credit find."²⁴ Pheroras obeys his sister's order and even justifies her break up with Constabarus by lying to Herod, saying that Salome chose her love for the nation over her traitor husband, who has been hiding the sons of Babas in his farm for twelve years. While Herod is blind to Salome's artful plan to become the Arabian's bride, Constabarus knows that it is her "hateful mind" that plots his death. "Angriness plays an important political role in enabling resistance, but is not inevitably emancipatory,"²⁵ Mary Holmes writes, and Salome's anger is not a constructive emotion that brings positive political change but a destructive act that results in the death of Mariam and Constabarus.

Although Herod and Salome are both murderers, the fact that the former is perceived as powerful and omnipotent while the latter is considered shrewd, "serpent-like," and "wors[e] than devil" suggests that violence is tolerated only in men. While no one questions Herod's execution of Mariam, Salome is guilty of "the blackest deed" for her murderous plots.²⁶ Ironically, Constabarus's anger is not directed at his executioner, Herod, but at Salome for revealing his secret that he has been hiding Herod's foes. Infidelity to a husband, then, constitutes a worse crime than the deadly decision of an oppressive king. Glossing over Herod's crimes of murder, Constabarus favors all Jewish men as worthy, and curses women, except Mariam, for being treacherous and wicked:

²³ Ibid., I. 6. 412-423.

²⁴ Ibid., III. 2. 81-82.

²⁵ Mary Holmes, "Feeling Beyond Rules: Politicizing the Sociology of Emotion and Anger in Feminist Politics," *European Journal of Social Theory* 7.2 (2004): 223.

²⁶ Cary, "Mariam," IV. 5. 265.

CONSTABARUS. You tigers, lionesses, hungry bears,
 Tear-massacring hyenas: nay, far worse,
 For they prey do shed their feigned tears.
 But you will weep (you creatures cross to good),
 For your unquenched thirst of human blood:
 You were the angels cast from Heav'n for pride,
 And still do keep your angels' outward show,
 But none of you are inly beautified [...]
 You are the wreck of order, breach of laws.
 [Your] best are foolish, froward, wanton, vain,
 Your worst adulterous, murderous, cunning, proud:
 And Salome attends the latter train, [...]²⁷

Constabarus dehumanizes angry women by using animalistic images and implies that it is only in man's nature to be violent. Harriet Lerner comments that "the direct expression of anger, especially at men," makes women "'shrews,' 'witches,' 'bitches,' 'hags,' 'nags,' 'man-haters,'"²⁸ Constabarus also scorns Salome for being unladylike and glosses over the fact that women's anger is a political tool to rebel against their oppressive marriages.

The text, however, does not confirm Constabarus's representation of female violence as a despicable crime: no poetic justice punishes Salome for her cunning and murderous plots. Unlike Mariam, she is not portrayed as a passive victim but rather as a triumphant survivor of female oppression. Berry Weller and Margaret Ferguson write that Salome freely executes plans "that a Mariam [...] might imagine but never actually perform," and her "theatrical energy reinforces the impression that Cary is, unofficially, intrigued rather than repelled by Mariam's evil twin."²⁹ Unaware of the fact that Mariam, too, wants her husband dead, Constabarus sets her aside from his stereotypical classification of women as either foolish or treacherous. In fact, Salome's comment that Mariam's "eyes do sparkle joy for Herod's death,"³⁰ problematizes Weller and Ferguson's distinction between the innocent queen and her villainous sister-in-law. Ironically, it is not the murderous Salome, but the queen with conflicting emotions of love and anger, and obedience and

²⁷ Ibid., IV. 6. 316-335.

²⁸ Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships* (New York: Perennial Currents, 1985), 2.

²⁹ Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson, "Introduction," 40.

³⁰ Cary, "Mariam," I. 3. 210.

rebellion, who is beheaded in the play. Mariam's tragic flaw³¹ is her lack of courage and determination to overtly challenge male power, and her refusal to be a political actor by exerting influence on Herod's decisions.

Women against Women: Salome, Mariam, and Doris

Instead of taking collective action against gender inequality, Cary's female characters channel their hate towards other women and blame one another for their subservient position in society. Michel Foucault's definition of power suggests that both sexes contribute to the functioning of the patriarchal system: "power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them."³² Cary's play shows how women contribute to male dominance by victimizing each other on the grounds of feminine virtue, class, and race, which, according to Gwynne Kennedy, primarily meant family and lineage in early modern England. At the time of its publication in 1613, the play served as a critique of British women of the time, who perpetuated female oppression by venting out their rage ineffectively at women.

Mariam, for example, displaces much of her anger for Herod onto Salome by using a "class-inflected language that serves the interests of those benefiting from the prevailing social order."³³ When Salome comments that Herod deserves a better wife, Mariam declares that a woman with a "baser birth" is not qualified to judge the queen:

MARIAM. My betters far! Base woman, 'tis untrue,
You scarce have ever my superiors seen:
For Mariam's servants were as good as you,
Before she came to be Judea's queen.³⁴

While Mariam insults Salome by comparing her to her former servants, Alexander advises her daughter that even having a conversation with Herod's

³¹ While Jeanne Addison Roberts argues that Mariam's tragic flaw is her pride, I agree with Jeffrey Lodge that her "mental turmoil, of being torn between wanting to be morally correct and believing herself not to be, is Mariam's tragedy" (*Pleiades*, 1992), 64.

³² Michel Foucault, "The Body of Condemned," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 174.

³³ Gwynne Kennedy, *Just Anger: Representing Women's Anger in Early Modern England* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U. P., 2000), 52.

³⁴ Cary, "Mariam," I. 3. 223-226.

sister would be stooping: "Come, Mariam, let us go: it is no boot / To let the head contend against the foot."³⁵ Mariam also takes advantage of her social status as the Queen of Jewry to claim that only her son can inherit the throne. She tells Herod's ex-wife, Doris, that the king does not esteem his first-born son, who does not share the queen's aristocratic lineage: "My children only for his own he deem'd, / These boys that did descend from royal line."³⁶ Mariam's emphasis on royal heritage to declare her superiority serves as a critique of early modern England that privileges the interests of the aristocracy.

The "fair" queen of Jewry also despises Salome for being half-Jewish and half-Edomite,³⁷ the Edomites being a group of Jews who lived close to Arabs for centuries. The pure-blooded Jewess claims her racial superiority by attributing Salome's "black acts" to her descent from the Edomites, inhabitants of the ancient kingdom of Edom, which was in conflict with Israel:

MARIAM. Thou parti-Jew, and parti-Edomite,
Thou mongrel: issu'd from rejected race,
Thy ancestors against the Heavens did fight,
And thou like them wilt heavenly birth disgrace.

SALOME. [...] What odds betwixt your ancestors and mine?
Both born of Adam, both were made of earth,
And both did come from holy Abraham's line.

MARIAM. I favour thee when nothing else I say,
With thy black acts I'll not pollute my breath.³⁸

As Mariam claims the superiority of her "fair" Maccabean family over the Edomites, Salome foregrounds their common lineage by commenting that they are both "born of Adam" and the followers of the prophet, Abraham. Mariam's focus on Salome's degree of Jewishness also resonates with the religious

³⁵ Ibid., I. 3. 259-260.

³⁶ Ibid., I. 2. 137-138.

³⁷ In *Dido's Daughters*, Margaret Ferguson writes: "The name of the people or 'nation' of Edom was frequently derived, by both Jewish and Christian commentators, from Esau, son of Isaac. [...] Esau's descendant Herod does not deserve to occupy a throne that should be occupied instead by members of Mariam's family, the Maccabeans, who claimed descent from [Esau's brother] Jacob" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 325. Esau and Jacob are the sons of Isaac and the grandsons of the prophet Abraham.

³⁸ Cary, "Mariam," I. 3. 235-245.

discrimination in Renaissance England: “While Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, and Queen Elizabeth had twice tried to expel both ‘Negroes and blackamoors’ from England in 1596 and 1601,” there was also a national anxiety that Christianized Jews and Muslims “continued to practice Judaism and Islam in secret.”³⁹ Mariam’s representation of Edomites as a “rejected race” is analogous to the discrimination of the Catholics with the establishment of the Anglican Church during the reign of Henry VIII. Although the play is set in the pre-Christian period, the two Jewish women’s dispute over religion serves as a critique of the conflict between Protestants and Catholics, and the hostility against the religious minorities in England.

Ironically, discriminated against on the grounds of race and class, Salome takes revenge on Mariam by judging her against traditional female roles and by framing her as an unfaithful wife. Marked as a shameful woman by her husband, Salome supports the feminine virtue of chastity by making Herod believe that the queen is having an affair with his counselor. Salome oppresses Mariam in just the same way Constabarus oppresses Salome, calling Mariam a woman with “impudency” marked on her forehead. She comments that although Mariam does not blush out of shame, her “foul dishonours do her forehead blot.”⁴⁰ Salome fails to “show [her] sex the freedom’s door” by framing Mariam as a fallen woman to justify her execution. Instead of forming a female bond to free themselves from their unhappy marriages, Salome and Mariam perpetuate ideals of feminine virtue by policing each other’s sexual conduct.

To secure herself in Herod’s kingdom, even Mariam’s mother, Alexander, allies herself with Salome by condemning the queen for wronging her noble husband. A messenger informs Herod that Alexander supports the king’s decision to kill the unfaithful queen: “She told her that her death was too too good, / And that already she had liv’d too long: / She said, she sham’d to have a part in blood/ Of her that did the princely Herod wrong.”⁴¹ Herod, who Alexander once labeled as a “fatal enemy,” “vile wretch,” “base Edomite” and “lunatic” for killing her son, becomes “princely” for executing her “fallen” daughter. Ironically, while mourning for and rebelling against Herod’s murder of her son and father, Alexander justifies and accepts Mariam’s punishment for her presumed adultery. By viewing honor crimes as pardonable and not pleading for Mariam’s life, Alexander also secures her safe place in Herod’s male-dominated society. Her denouncement of Mariam for Herod shows that

³⁹ Kimberly Woosley Poitevin, “‘Counterfeit Colour’: Making up Race in Elizabeth Cary’s ‘The Tragedy of Mariam,’” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 24.1 (2005): 18.

⁴⁰ Cary, “Mariam,” IV. 7. 406.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, V. 1. 41-44.

even mothers can feel compelled to comply with patriarchal traditions, even if those traditions require their daughters to be killed for dishonoring their families.

With Mariam's execution, Herod's ex-wife, Doris, too, takes revenge from the queen who took her husband. Instead of directing her anger towards Herod, who left his family after five years of marriage, she prays for Mariam's death: "The fall of her that on my trophy stands. / Revenge I have according to my will, / Yet where I wish'd this vengeance did not light: / I wish'd it should high-hearted Mariam kill."⁴² The way she channels her anger towards Mariam shows that she has accepted men's right to leave their wives for other women. She laments that Mariam robbed her from the prospect of becoming the queen of Jewry. "Was I not fair enough to be a queen?" Doris asks, and questions whether she is not racially pure, noble, and virtuous enough to represent the country or to be the mother of Herod's successor. Doris's ambitious son, on the other hand, wants to murder his "bastard" brothers to replace his presumably dead father's "royal seat and dignity."⁴³ Instead of saving Mariam from death, Doris enjoys the fact that she, too, is a victim of Herod's tyranny, and that the "black," "spotted," and sinful queen deserves to be punished. The Chorus comments that "in base revenge there is no honour won,"⁴⁴ and regards Doris's vengeance against the queen on death row ignoble. The Chorus represents Doris as "a worthless foe" to Mariam because of her inability to show anger at her deserting husband, whose deadly decision she fully supports and celebrates.

Overall, as a Catholic writer oppressed by both patriarchy and the Protestant Church, Cary was well-positioned to portray how ideologies of sex, race, and religion intersected in British women's oppression in the early 1600s. Although Cary was ahead of her time with her portrayal of angry wives trapped in marriage, her attack of sexual and racial discrimination was limited to her closet drama, which was never performed on stage. Mariam's violent wish for Herod's death and Salome's adulterous relationship with an Arab could have been more effective on stage, reaching a wider audience and encouraging them to question the white male supremacy during the reign of James I. The lofty style of tragedy and the lack of stage performance made the play accessible only to the aristocracy. The enclosed and isolated space of closet drama, which was performed only in households, permitted Cary to criticize the established authority without overtly transgressing her private sphere. In fact, the play ends with a moralistic tone as the Chorus confirms Mariam's innocence, and also advises Hebrews to call for "the school of wisdom" to restore social order. The

⁴² Ibid., II. 3. 250-253.

⁴³ Ibid., II. 3. 257.

⁴⁴ Ibid., V. 1. 638.

Chorus suggests that wisdom should replace anger, which, in one day, has resulted in the death of Mariam, Constabarus, and the sons of Babas. While Herod's anger breeds violence, women's hostility toward one another normalizes gender, racial, and religious discrimination. The female characters' socially unacceptable feelings of hate and anger, which do not even come to life on stage, do not subvert male dominance or change divorce laws. In the absence of an empowering and supportive network among women, their anger cannot change sexual politics, but instead only serves to uphold the prevailing social order based on sexual and racial inequality.

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