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The Politics of Marriage: Queen Elizabeth I and Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*

The English Renaissance saw the emergence of several young women writers and political figures. Despite the patriarchal social structure and strong misogyny of the time, these women resisted male authority within the literary world and challenged the unjust restraints placed on women's publication. They expressed themselves primarily through literature and their writing was made possible by several factors, the greatest among them being the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). Throughout her monarchy, Elizabeth employed strategies grounded in her femininity to justify her position as England's ruler. Her impact on women's ability to challenge prevailing gender norms was immense and she remained an example to her sex even after her death. The Queen's successful reign not only provided women with the license to write; it also influenced several literary works of the Renaissance including Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*.

First published in 1613, the drama tells the story of Mariam, a queen of Judea and the wife of Herod the Great. Although historical accounts of the story, such as Josephus's *Jewish War* (A.D. 69-79) and his *Antiquities of the Jews* (A.D. 93) focus on the tragic marriage of Mariam and Herod, Cary's play is exceptional in that it centers instead on the conflicts between several female characters, including: Alexandra, Mariam's mother, Salome, her sister-in-law, and Doris, Herod's first wife. The chief source of discord among the women arises over how each of them defines their role within marriage, as well as over how successfully each embodies the traditional feminine virtues of chastity, silence, and obedience. In the beginning of the play, Mariam informs the reader of Herod's death, which sets up the sexual and political conflict addressed throughout the text. In particular, Cary presents two antithetical female characters -- Mariam and Salome -- who react to Herod's death with happiness and regret respectively.

Mariam experiences joy as she is liberated from the tyranny of her marriage, while Salome feels regret as her brother's death prevents her from divorcing her husband, Constabarus, to marry her lover, Silleus. Despite the differences in their attitudes toward Herod's death, they are similar in their resistance to the authority of their husbands throughout the drama. Nonetheless, both women's actions result in the dissolution of their marriages and, ultimately, in Mariam's death. Accordingly, through her depiction of Mariam and Salome, Cary critiques the social framework of marriage and its effects on female political figures. The characters' failure to effectively resist their husbands' authority illustrates the failure of female action and agency within this institutional framework. Most importantly, by drawing attention to the incompatibility of sexuality and power, the play offers an implicit homage to Queen Elizabeth I, who established herself as a strong female monarch precisely because of her unmarried status.

Following the reign of her half-sister Mary Tudor (1553-58), Elizabeth I succeeded to the throne in 1558. Highly conscious of her sex in a political system dominated by men, Elizabeth manipulated traditional feminine attributes in order to gain acceptance from her courtiers and country alike. Specifically, the Queen used her speeches to fashion fixed images of herself as mother, virgin, and wife to her nation. Elizabeth's guise as mother is evident in her affectionate relationship with Parliament. She achieved this through employing maternal imagery to characterize herself as a loving and caring ruler of her people. She defined her rule not as absolute, but as a form of exchange, stating, "What you bestow on me, I will not hoard it up, but receive it to bestow on you again. Yea, my own properties I account yours to be expended for your good, and your eyes shall see the bestowing of all for your good" ("Golden Speech" 701). In this speech, the Queen maintains that, in return for their loyalty and love, she will provide Parliament with stability and protection. Although this nurturing image was represented most

clearly in her speeches to Parliament, Elizabeth presented herself in a similar manner to the public. She used maternal rhetoric to connect with the people of England and presented their safety and well-being as her foremost priority.

While the monarch's concern for her people was probably sincere, the emphasis she placed on her responsibility to England held greater significance as it was her main justification for remaining unmarried. Despite petitions from Parliament, Elizabeth was able to avoid surrendering her sovereignty to a male consort, a move which was central to her success as a female sovereign. Her primary strategy for avoiding marriage was to continually place her country before herself. She "postpones the issue of marriage and succession by arguing that her responsibility as head of state outweighs her female obligation to bear children and perpetuate her line" (Rohrs 4). In her speeches, the Queen separated herself from the rest of her sex by emphasizing her divine duty to the state. Moreover, she frequently represented herself as engaged in a marriage to England and she supported this image by declaring herself a "Virgin Queen." Through her self-portrayal as a virgin, Elizabeth reaffirmed her total submission to God and loyalty to the state, "elevating her femininity beyond compliance to normal social expectations" (Rohrs 26). As a wife to her country, the monarch adopted the ideal feminine qualities of chastity and devotion to the state in order to maintain her authority over it.

Along with justifying her unmarried status, Elizabeth's depiction of herself as wife and mother to England also enabled her to maintain control over her private and public images. Within her private life, she presented herself as an idealized beloved and the sole object of desire in her relationships with her courtiers; at the same time, by portraying herself as married to the state she remained unattainable to her male supplicants. Conversely, within the public sphere, Elizabeth displayed herself not as a virginal maiden or wife, but as a mother to the state and to

Parliament. Accordingly, in her “Golden Speech,” she declares that “there is no prince that loveth his subjects better, or whose love can countervail our loves” (701). She compares their “loves” to a “jewel” of the highest value and expresses gratitude for their trust. Elizabeth addresses the members of Parliament graciously and requites their love with devotion and fidelity to their interests. Through her expressions of devotion to her subjects, she procured the status of an idealized beloved, on the one hand, and a nurturing parent, on the other.

Along with employing the language of marriage and motherhood to buttress her reign, Elizabeth also depicted herself as a female monarch whose rule was divinely ordained, in order to supplement her authority. Combining accepted notions of “woman’s subservience and the divine right of kings,” Elizabeth validated her monarchy by presenting herself as a devoted servant to God (Rohrs 2). She thus informs Parliament that she is an “instrument” through which God protects the people of England from “envy, peril, dishonor, shame, tyranny, and oppression” (701). Here, she asserts that her authority is derived by heavenly ordinance and, in doing so, she manipulates behavioral expectations to overcome the belief that only male monarchs could act as divine representatives. The presentation of her relationship with God, in turn, allows the Queen to redefine the existing gender hierarchy, whereby she elevates herself to a position directly beneath divinity: “And as I am that person that still, yet under God, hath delivered you, so I trust, by the almighty power of God, that I shall be His instrument...” (701). As this statement indicates, Elizabeth justifies her authority over all her subjects, including her male counselors, by claiming that her actions are spiritually sanctioned.

Ten years after Queen Elizabeth’s demise in 1603, Elizabeth Cary (1585–1639) published *The Tragedy of Mariam* in 1613, at the age of twenty-eight. Her work was written as a closet drama, a play intended for reading rather than for theatrical performance. Although Elizabeth I

died a decade before *The Tragedy of Mariam* was written, her influence is evident in Cary's introductory sonnet to the play. In the sonnet, which she dedicates to her sister-in-law, who is also named Elizabeth, Cary writes "You Luna-like, unspotted, chaste, divine" and claims "For you, my Phoebe, shines my second light" (8, 10). Her dedication of the sonnet serves not only as a reference to her name as well as her sister-in-law's, but also draws attention to Elizabeth I, the monarch for whom both women were probably named, and who was most-frequently celebrated as Phoebe or Diana, the goddess of the moon and of chastity. The representation of the play's two main female characters also serves to emphasize Queen Elizabeth's status as a powerful role model for women in the early modern period, as well as to glorify her success as the sole monarch of England. In the *Tragedy*, Cary highlights how female political figures are forced to negotiate between their role in the private and public spheres as a result of marriage. Her play serves not only to critique marriage, but also to ultimately praise Elizabeth I, as she successfully maintained a role of power by avoiding placing herself in a position where her political status would automatically have been subordinated to that of her husband.

Through her depiction of Mariam and Salome, Cary critiques the institution of marriage within the state and its effects on female political figures. In the drama, she sets up a dichotomy between Mariam and Salome that focuses on their relationships with King Herod, as well as their response to traditional gender expectations. Within the tragedy, Mariam is wife to Herod, the Biblical tyrant of Jerusalem. Suppressed by both her husband and the existing patriarchal expectations represented by the Chorus, she is ultimately trapped within her marriage. Like and unlike Mariam, Salome desires to escape from an unhappy marriage and attempts to do so by challenging the traditional strictures against female divorce. As a result, both women are defined by their antagonistic attitudes toward marriage.

In keeping with its primary theme, the play opens with a speech that voices Mariam's conflict regarding Herod's supposed death:

But I had rather still be foe than friend
 To him that saves for hate and kills for love.
 Hard-hearted Mariam, at thy discontent
 What floods of tears have drenched his manly face? (1.61-65)

She experiences an internal conflict between her feelings of joy and grief. Although she harbors feelings of hatred toward Herod and his tyranny, she is unable express them fully without immediately experiencing remorse. In her essay "Gender and the Political Subject in *The Tragedy of Mariam*," Karen Raber states that "As soon as Mariam's anger finds expression, it is undermined, contained, and channeled into self-directed angry emotion" (330). Her suppressed anger stems from the patriarchal structure upon which she develops her sense of self. Because Herod represents a higher position in the both the domestic and political hierarchy, she cannot directly "censure" her husband and she repeatedly apologizes for expressing "too rash a judgment" as a woman within her soliloquy (1.2-7). Additionally, Herod's death engenders mixed emotions as Mariam derives her identity from her marriage to him (Raber 331). In both their public and private relationships, Herod holds all authority and Mariam maintains a subservient role as wife and subject to the King. Because her identity is centered on male standards and expectations, it is difficult for Mariam to question or challenge her husband and his tyrannical rule.

Since the patriarchal ideology within which Mariam is framed grants her limited power, her speeches offer her a highly-circumscribed form of resistance. As the Chorus in Act 3 clarifies, female language is fraught with danger:

That wife her hand against her fame doth rear
 That more than to her lord alone will give
 A private word to any second ear;

And though she may with reputation live,
 Yet though most chaste, she doth her glory blot,
 And wounds her honour, though she kills it not (3 Chorus 227-232)

The Chorus argues that a woman should speak only within her marriage, limiting her thoughts to her husband's ear. Moreover, it warns that speech directed toward the public may "blot" a woman's virtuous reputation. Thus, it becomes impossible for Mariam to directly challenge the authority of her husband as she is powerless within her marriage and risks damaging her virtue by speaking outside of it (Clarke 9). In addition, the connection between speech and sexual chastity requires that Mariam submit herself in both mind and body to Herod. Unable to assert herself through speech or action, Mariam possesses limited means through which to establish herself as an individual agent who can act in opposition to her husband's authority.

Because her speech is limited to the domestic sphere, Mariam does not hold any agency within the political sphere, despite her royal birth. As a direct descendant of the Biblical David, Mariam possesses a stronger claim to the throne than Herod. However, as wife and queen to Herod, this truth becomes inconsequential. Her only public duty is to support her husband and guarantee his succession by producing an acceptable heir to the throne (Clarke 6). Mariam is held to traditional gender expectations, but on a scale of greater magnitude. Furthermore, she serves an identical role within the domestic and political worlds, as a result of the gender norms that are applied to both realms. The figure of Herod, present or not, inhibits her ability to establish herself as a significant political actor and achieve greater authority for herself.

Since she is unable to resist the tyranny of her husband through effective speech, Mariam turns to beauty as a tool for achieving equality in her marriage, claiming "If fair she [Mariam] be, she is as chaste as fair" (4.581). However, her beauty is also the primary source of her downfall. In the play, Herod, fearful of his wife's infidelity, instructs Sohemus, one of his counselors, to

spy on Mariam during his absence. On his return, Herod is falsely told that Sohemus has attempted to win over Mariam by informing her of Herod's surveillance. Overcome by jealousy of Sohemus and paranoia that Mariam has been unfaithful to him, the Judean king sentences them both to death. Although aware of Herod's great jealousy, Mariam does not fear for her life, as she associates beauty with chastity and virtue and assumes that others will accept this notion as well. Speaking to Sohemus, Mariam declares that "Salome in vain might spend her wind" as she could "enchain him [Herod] with a smile" (3.163-167). Mariam dismisses Salome, placing full faith in her ability to charm Herod through her beauty. Since her speech is either circumscribed or condemned, Mariam chooses to rely on her appearance instead of her words to prove her innocence and preserve her marriage. However, instead of acting as a source for her salvation, Mariam's beauty and the jealousy it engenders, expedites her downfall and ultimately leads to her execution at Salome's instigation.

By highlighting Mariam's failure to be either a successful wife or a skillful politician, Cary implicitly validates Queen Elizabeth's decision to remain unmarried. As a single female monarch, Elizabeth maintains control over her male courtiers while Mariam cannot. Moreover, she possesses the ability to fashion and manipulate elements, such as speech and image, in a way that works to her advantage and allows her to overcome traditional beliefs concerning women and marriage; whereas, Mariam holds the same elements, and yet is unable to do the same. While Mariam exists as part of her husband, Elizabeth forms her identity in relation to God and his will. She presents herself as a humble servant to God stating "I speak it to give God the praise as a testimony before you, and not to attribute anything unto myself" which allows her to juxtapose her status with His, and thereby surmount the existing male hierarchy ("Golden Speech" 703). By engaging in an alliance with God and not a husband, Elizabeth elevates

herself above male authority. She is thus no longer affected by gender restraints within marriage. Although Mariam and Elizabeth may both have been classified as having subservient roles within their private or personal worlds, Mariam is unable to break from her private world while Elizabeth straddles both arenas successfully.

Similar to the construction of their identities, Elizabeth and Mariam hold distinctly unequal amounts of control over language. In the drama, Mariam suffers extreme limitations set by her husband, his advisors, and the Chorus on her speech. These restrictions are enforced by contemporary standards of chastity and virtue, as sex and speech within marriage are closely linked. Therefore, Mariam is vulnerable to accusations of sexual transgression in her resistance to authority (Raber 328). By marrying Herod, Mariam relinquishes not only her legal rights, under the doctrine of coverture, which stated that a woman's property was merged with that of her husband's, but also her right to her body and language. In contrast, the absence of a husband allows Elizabeth to preserve these rights. She exercises complete control over her speech, which she uses to secure her position as England's monarch. She responds to petitions regarding marriage by replacing a husband with the state, which in turn allows her to preserve her right to both public and private speech. In addition, emphasizing her marriage to the state and her subservient role to God enables Elizabeth to retain control over her physical body. Thus, she avoids any risk of blemishing her reputation and undermining her virtuous image.

The presence of a male figure influences not only Mariam and Elizabeth's speeches, but also their power within the political and domestic worlds. As a patriarchal structure defined both spheres, Mariam's authority and status remain below that of her husband and she does not take part in state affairs outside of his involvement. Conversely, Queen Elizabeth maintained control over both realms as she remained unmarried throughout her reign. Without a husband, the

decision of producing an heir or not becomes her own. She also increases her power by occupying the throne as queen, as well as king. In her speech to the troops at Tilbury, she states, “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too” (“Tilbury Speech” 700). Elizabeth portrays herself as both male and female therefore securing jurisdiction over their corresponding gender roles, while Mariam remains subordinate to Herod. Where Mariam is bound by traditional expectations that state she must serve and obey her husband, Elizabeth resists these demands through employing both sexes in her self-fashioning.

While Cary uses the character of Mariam to depict the restrictions marriage places on women in politics, she employs the character of Salome to demonstrate female resistance to these constraints. Mariam is passive as well as chaste in opposing her husband’s tyranny; conversely, Salome is adulterous and argues forcefully for her right to divorce her husband. However, Salome, like Mariam, is held to the same gendered expectations, including those regarding speech. Accordingly, when she asks her husband, Constabarus, for a divorce, so that she can marry her lover, he responds:

Oh Salome, how much you wrong your name,
Your race, you country and your husband most!
A stranger’s private conference is shame;
I blush for you, that have your blushing lost (1.375-378)

She is chided by her husband for meeting with Silleus in secret, and engaging in adulterous behavior, while she is a married woman. Yet, Salome shows little regard for her husband’s expectations regarding female speech and movement, and further resists her husband’s authority in seeking a “divorcing bill” stating “I mean not to be led by precedent; / My will shall be to me instead of law” (1. 453-454). She rejects established laws in order to achieve her own political ends.

However, like Mariam, Salome remains trapped within the constraints of marriage. She renounces her husband only to replace him with her lover. Although she claims that her objective in divorcing her husband is to “show my sex the way to freedom’s door,” her goals serve to fulfill a personal rather than a political desire. (1.310). Salome focuses only on her own aspirations and empowers herself at the expense of others:

This will be Constabarus’ quick dispatch,
Which from my mouth would lesser credit find.
Yet shall he not decease without a match,
For Mariam shall not linger long behind (2.81-84)

She employs deceit and fabrication to eliminate those individuals who impede her ability to achieve sexual freedom. Moreover, she expresses no remorse for her deeds: “But shame is gone and honour wiped away, / and Impudency on my forehead sits” (1.293-294), and acknowledges her lack of concern for her reputation. Karen Raber states that “these qualities are to Salome merely superficial layers of behavior easily shed when circumstance demands” (335). Unlike Mariam who attempts to maintain her commitment to the traditional virtues of chastity and silence, Salome constantly alters her image in order to serve her own ends.

Aside from embodying deceitfulness, Salome is similarly inconsistent and hypocritical in her rejection of patriarchy. She resists male authority to free herself of her husband, but then employs it to manipulate Herod and bring about the death of Mariam, informing him that:

She [Mariam] speaks a beauteous language, but within
Her heart is false as powder, and her tongue
Doth but allure the auditors to sin,
And is the instrument to do you wrong (4.428-431)

She attempts to persuade Herod of Mariam’s infidelity and exploits his jealousy and paranoia to sanction her execution, as Mariam’s death will not only satisfy Salome’s vengeance towards Mariam, but also elevate her to a position of greater power in the court. By speaking out against

Mariam, Salome illustrates that she rejects the structure of patriarchy when it is disadvantageous to her, yet embraces its beliefs when she may benefit from them.

Although Salome engages in behavior that challenges patriarchal authority, her speech serves to empower her at the cost of harming others. As a result, she is vilified within the play for her manipulation of Herod and her transgressions against Mariam and Constabarus. She is likewise portrayed as devious and unchaste which contributes to her negative image in the drama. In her essay “This Domestic Kingdome or Monarchy: Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* and the Resistance to Patriarchal Government,” Danielle Clarke suggests that “Salome’s resistance to extant state laws seems to be included *not* to outline an idea of freedom and choice for women but to set up an instructive contrast” (5). Thus, Salome’s character is not intended to represent ideal behavior for women, but acts in opposition to Mariam’s victimization and martyrdom. While Salome claims to seek justice and freedom for all women, she condemns Mariam for infidelity in her marriage to win Herod’s favor for her own suit.

While Cary uses Salome and Mariam to develop contrasting feminine representations within the play, her portrayal of Salome as a villainous manipulator also highlights Elizabeth’s status as an idealized beloved. In the text, Salome abandons her virtuous reputation to pursue autonomy and relies on destructive and manipulative rhetoric to get what she wants. Conversely, Elizabeth preserves her virtue and freedom by placing herself within a marriage to the state and declaring herself a Virgin Queen. Moreover, she uses maternal imagery to portray herself as a caring and nurturing monarch and establishes a fond relationship with her subjects. Elizabeth is consistent in her speech and in her self-fashioned image, while Salome continuously alters her speech and behavior to fit her motives.

Moreover, Cary’s depiction of Salome is anti-Mariam as well as anti-Elizabeth.

In the play, Mariam and Salome respond and resist patriarchy in disparate ways. While Mariam attempts to negotiate within the constraints of her marriage, Salome is openly defiant towards her husband. The two characters' motives for acquiring freedom are also contrasting, as Mariam resists the authority of her husband to regain possession of her "self," whereas Salome's actions are rooted in personal desire. Mariam employs speech to assert herself and convey her feelings: "I cannot frame disguise, nor never taught / My face a look dissenting from my thoughts" (4.144-145), but her expressions of discontent are censure by the Chorus and she is later condemned for being unchaste. In contrast, Salome manipulates others through her speech: "Now tongue of mine with scandal load her name, / Turn hers to fountains, Herod's eyes to flame!" (3.97-98). Recognizing Herod's weakness, she falsely accuses Mariam of infidelity. Although she is never overtly criticized for her deceit within the play, Salome is naturally viewed as duplicitous. Danielle Clarke proposes that "the representation of Salome functions to...problematize the question of resistance for a chaste and virtuous wife" (5). The dichotomy set up between Mariam and Salome in the play offers two different views of female resistance to patriarchy, but it also serves to emphasize the invariable failure of both women's marriages.

In *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Elizabeth Cary critiques the institution of marriage and the way in which it impacts women's relationship to the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of the early modern state. Through her depiction of Mariam and Salome, Cary addresses the constraints marriage places on women, with regard to speech, identity, and power. Cary's portrayal of the women and failure of each marriage in turn glorifies Elizabeth I and her success as a female monarch. Unlike Mariam and Salome, whose rhetoric invariably works against them, the Queen's speeches allowed her to construct a powerful image of herself that functioned as an example to her sex in the decades following her death.

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