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## Gender and the Political Subject in *The Tragedy of Mariam*

KAREN L. RABER

When Elizabeth Cary was only ten years old, her father took her to a trial in which he was judging a woman accused of witchcraft:

But the child, seeing the poor woman in so terrible a fear, and in so simple a manner confess all, thought fear had made her idle, so she whispered her father and desired him to ask her whether she had bewitched to death Mr John Symondes of such a place (her uncle that was one of the standers-by). He did so, to which she said yes, just as she had done to the rest . . . then (all the company laughing) he asked her what she ailed to say so? told her the man was alive, and stood there . . . Then he examined her what she meant to confess all this, if it were false? She answered they had threatened her if she would not confess, and said, if she would, she should have mercy showed her—which she said with such simplicity that (the witness brought against her being of little force, and her own confession appearing now to be of less) she was easily believed innocent and [ac]quitted.<sup>1</sup>

This much quoted scene from Cary's childhood offers a positive vision of the place domestic or familial counsel might occupy in the public, political world of seventeenth-century England. Cary's inaudible transmission, channeled privately between father and daughter, girl and judge, is compatible with cultural

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proscriptions of women's speech. Yet here, domestic counsel, instead of being erased or contained, intervenes to salvage the tyranny potential in this legal judgment. It is successful precisely *because* it creates a private space within the public world of the court. If Cary's words were overheard, her trick would not work. She has access to her father's ear because she is his daughter; and because she is not a public figure, she can intrude her voice in this minimal, intimate, but powerful fashion to change the outcome of public decision making.

Yet Cary's first play, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, written when Cary was perhaps only fifteen or sixteen years old, and published in 1613, directly contradicts the idyllic cooperation of domestic ideology and political decision making this anecdote describes, a discrepancy which provides the impetus for this article. *The Tragedy of Mariam* offers us two images of a woman whispering into the ear of a politically powerful male figure, but in both cases such domestic counsel ends in disruption and tragedy. Mariam, the play's protagonist, chastely and properly restricts her speech to her husband's ear, but is ultimately executed for treason and adultery. Salome, Mariam's rival and opposite, who by no stretch of the imagination could be called "proper," constructs the scaffold on which Mariam dies with her insinuating speeches to her brother Herod. Because *The Tragedy of Mariam* offers two such antithetical versions of the gendered political subject, and because both resonate so peculiarly with Cary's early experience at her father's side as well as with her later experience of domesticity and marriage, I believe this play provides a unique and productive site for examining one writer's interrogation of the contradictions in late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century political philosophy that yoked justifications of monarchy to contemporary Protestant views of marriage, household government, and domestic organization. Cary's early aspirations, as demonstrated in the opening anecdote, rest upon a practical union of domestic and public spheres, but are foreclosed in her drama in favor of a strong critique of just that type of union. Mariam's tragedy proves that cultural uncertainty about women's domestic place is the symptom of a larger socio-cultural disease, one which threatens the very stability of the state.

The issues *The Tragedy of Mariam* addresses, although they are abstract and ideological in nature, had material implications for Cary herself and demand to be understood in the context of Cary's upbringing and marriage. Cary was born Elizabeth Tanfield, to a gentry family whose religious and familial ties were

complexly influenced by various demands, adjustments, and accommodations to changing political reality and ideological pressures. Although the Tanfields were practicing Protestants, determined to instill correct Protestant values in their daughter, their religious affiliation owed as much to their ambitions for her marital future as to genuine devotion. Cary's upbringing consequently compelled her acceptance of hegemonic Protestant conceptions of marriage and woman's place, but simultaneously showed her that Protestant ideals could not be extricated from familial political desires. Cary herself was capable of exploiting this connection: realizing, for instance, that her marital potential was a tool, specifically a monetary one, she bribed the family servants to supply her with candles for reading after she was forbidden her books by her mother, by promising them payment upon her marriage.

At the age of fifteen, a match was arranged for Elizabeth Tanfield with Henry Cary, an ambitious courtier, Master of the Jewel House to Queen Elizabeth at the time of his betrothal. Her marriage concretized for Cary her sense that her own "real" value was as the conduit for political and financial alliance, and revealed incongruities in familial and cultural definitions of her wifely role. Immediately after the marriage, Henry Cary departed for the Continent; Elizabeth Cary was required to write to him. Her parents, however, fearing her facility with argument and reason would repel her husband, arranged to have letters written by some more "proper" young lady, whose writing would demonstrate the schoolgirl charm and simplicity Henry Cary might expect from his fifteen-year-old wife. When Cary finally wrote in her own voice to her husband, he "believed some other did (the letters), till, having examined her about it and found the contrary, he grew better acquainted with her, and esteemed her more."<sup>2</sup> Mental activity and abilities which she assiduously cultivated in the sporadically hostile environment of her own family were now clearly branded incompatible with her true utility; intelligence was no virtue, not even an enhancement to virtue in the cementing of a status-oriented marriage. Paradoxically, however, it was precisely her intelligence, thoughtfulness, and mental agility which eventually endeared her to her husband and made a happy family out of a mere alliance until Cary's conversion to Catholicism provoked her permanent separation from her husband. The conditions of Cary's early experience of her marriage thus reflect the material consequences of a fundamental ideological gap in the Renaissance treatment of marriage. While her class origins, which marked Cary as a

valuable means of cementing status for both the Tanfields and the Carys, made her arranged marriage a matter of family politics, the ideal of affectionate, companionable marriage affirmed by Protestant thought demanded that the marriage be more than a strategic association.

William Whately's *A Bride-Bush*, published in 1617, expressed the desirable mutuality of marital relations, insisting that in marriage "all must labor" for love as well as for practical accommodation.<sup>3</sup> John Heydon's *Advice to a Daughter* seeks to counter charges that marriage is only a burden by asserting that "It is the Crown of blessings when in one woman a man finds both a Wife and a friend."<sup>4</sup> Heydon assumes that a "complete" wife is one whose companionship can approximate male friendship. He claims that "A wise Wife comprehends both Sexes; She is woman for her body, and she is man within, for her Soul is like her Husbands."<sup>5</sup> To be agreeable, a fit companion, half of the whole, a woman must be split within herself: she must have the attractions of womanly virtue and physical beauty, but the mind and soul of a man. Much of the strenuous and repetitive argument of early modern conduct and marriage literature stems from anxiety about the easy step from woman's dual role as wife and friend, comprehending qualities of both male and female, to problems with duplicity, dissembling, and the confusion of gender roles and boundaries.

The advice Cary eventually had inscribed on her daughter's wedding ring, to "Be and Seem," encompasses the problem of marriage for a woman of Cary's background. The need to equate appearance and reality speaks eloquently about the clear gulf between the two. Renaissance conduct books might expound upon the need for courtier-like dissembling in a wife, but they then had to contend with the possibility of duplicity, capitalized upon by the wife seeking power or freedom. Once they suggest that "being" is nonidentical with "seeming," the seemliness of conduct-book writers' advice is made dubious at best. Cary's "seemly" act in ordering the inscription actually suggests her comprehension of this fact and its various uses and implications.

One of the most frequently voiced prescriptions for the good wife involved curbing her tongue. William Gouge, in his *Of Domesticall Duties*, specifies that "a wives reverence is manifested by the speech, both in her husbands presence, and also in his absence. For this end in his presence her words must be few, reverend and meeke."<sup>6</sup> Thomas Salter's *Mirrhour of Modestie* says of the model maiden "I would not have her . . . to be a babble or greate talker."<sup>7</sup> Gouge connects women's speech within the home with the Pauline prescription against women's speech in

church: "he speaketh not only of a womans silence in the Church, but also of a wives silence before her husband . . . The reason beforementioned for silence, on the one side implieth a reverend subjection, as on the other side too much speech implieth an usurpation of authoritie."<sup>8</sup> In church, at home, wherever she might open her mouth, a woman's speech threatened male "authority" and contradicted ideals of feminine "subjection."

As a neo-Senecan closet drama, Cary's play makes use of an ambiguous genre, one which conflates public and private modes of communication: the closet drama was dedicated to advice and public influence, and even presumed to reach the monarch's ear, in part because it was never intended for public dissemination. The genre restricted itself in theory to a coterie milieu; because of this limited audience, the genre established a link between the interests of the upper classes and the policies of the monarch, and served as a type of literary courtiership in England as it had originally done in France.<sup>9</sup> However, closet dramas in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries were often published, apparently violating the supposed distinctions the genre upheld in contrast with public theater; the genre is thus in itself highly duplicitous, using the pretense of deliberate containment to effect, not hinder, a woman's public voice. The play's genre, then, also cooperates with those discourses which limit a woman's scope of self-expression; but, as I will argue here, its content, as duplicitous as its genre, challenges the very foundations of such discourses.

In her *Tragedy of Mariam*, Cary examines both the successes and failures of women's speech, whether to husbands, brothers, or kings. Margaret Ferguson has argued that Mariam's first appearance in Cary's play immediately poses the problem of a public voice, and the dangers public speech entails for a woman. Mariam's speech foregrounds the social stigma that applies directly to Cary herself, a woman writing ultimately for a public readership.<sup>10</sup> The play opens with Herod absent; his past deeds and present tyranny made him, while living, an object of hatred to his wife. Now that his death is rumored, however, Mariam vacillates over her feelings. In the play's first lines, Mariam asks rhetorically,

How oft have I with public voice run on?  
 To censure Rome's last hero for deceit:  
 . . . . .  
 But now I do recant, and Roman Lord  
 Excuse too rash a judgement in a woman.<sup>11</sup>

Having introduced the problem of women's speech, however, Mariam quickly moves on to articulate her role in terms of various other Renaissance paradigms for flawed femininity, including that which claims women are by nature inconstant. It seems at first surprising that Cary creates a character who so fully realizes Renaissance cautions about woman's defective nature. Mariam's exposition of her changeable feelings for Herod echoes, for instance, Elyot's *Defence of Good Women*, in which the antifeminist Caninius repeatedly refers to Aristotle's argument that "their [women's] most unperfection is their inconstancye, which procedeth of their said naturall debilitie."<sup>12</sup> According to Caninius, too much fear or love, both of which women are prone to, equates with instability in everything from speech ("her proprietie" he says, "is to delyte in rebukyng") to reason. Joseph Swetnam's 1615 pamphlet *Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Inconstant Women* indicates in its title how central inconstancy and presumption to speech were to antifeminist writers.<sup>13</sup> Cary's play reproduces these arguments about women's changeable and imperfect nature, but in a dramatically different way—literally, since she dramatizes inconstancy itself, exposing its source. What Mariam's opening speeches demonstrate is that expectations fostered by men, deployed socially to construct domestic, specifically marital relationships, do not reflect, but produce inconstancy.

If we turn to the chorus's most powerful articulation of the logical extremes of Renaissance thought on women's place and behavior, we find these expectations are themselves contradictory, changeable and erratic. In act III, scene iii, the chorus exhorts Mariam to behave as a "good wife" should. But in its delineation of "proper" behavior, the chorus is unable finally to locate any position, speaking or silent, private or public, that would be acceptable in a wife:

'Tis not enough for one that is a wife  
 To keep her spotless from an act of ill:  
 But from suspicion she should free her life,  
 And bare herself of power as well as will.  
 'Tis not so glorious for her to be free,  
 As by her proper self restrain'd to be.

.....

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.

When to their husbands they themselves do bind,  
 Do they not wholly give themselves away?  
 Or give they but their body, not their mind,  
 Reserving that, though best, for others' prey?  
     No sure, their thoughts no more can be their own,  
     And therefore should to none but one be known.

Then she usurps upon another's right,  
 That seeks to be by public language grac'd:  
 And though her thoughts reflect with purest light,  
 Her mind if not peculiar is not chaste.  
     For in a wife it is no worse to find  
     A common body than a common mind.

(III. 215-44)

What the chorus affirms here is the adequacy of social codes to determine a wife's subjectivity. Margaret Ferguson and Betty Travitsky point out that the chorus's argument expands upon the doctrine of coverture which makes the wife's legal being identical with her husband's during marriage—her existence is assumed to be coextensive with his, subsumed into his.<sup>14</sup> Given that the wife so defined is in effect represented by her husband's will, the chorus argues that the direction of her speech should be inward, to the marriage and to her husband, not outward toward a public audience. The chorus delineates an extremely narrow view of the domestic sphere women occupy, yet this view is culturally powerful and representative of much conduct literature and political writing on the subordinate role of women within marriage.

But Cary's play exposes coverture as illogical ideology. In Mariam's case, as in that of the ideal woman of the conduct books, only her husband qualifies as an appropriate domestic audience; yet, as Margaret Ferguson points out, speaking only to Herod ultimately leads to Mariam's execution, while Catherine Belsey argues that Mariam cannot in fact give her mind to her husband, that the chorus cannot finally confront the implications of the erasure of Mariam as a subject.<sup>15</sup> I wish to demonstrate that tensions in the play's representation of domestic connections grow out of anxiety, not only about women's speech

itself, but also about the motivation and self-determination required to speak outside the limited channel between husband and wife. This more diffuse cultural anxiety about women's self-determination and self-motivation is displaced onto the standard framework of sexual chastity: if Mariam resists the chorus's prescription and speaks into any other ear, she risks being "suspect" for sexual transgression. She is her husband's possession: the chorus's use of terms like "usurp" and "common" makes sexual mastery analogous to a political battle over land rights or borders, but these terms also inadvertently endow a wife with the power to "usurp" masculine prerogatives, even to democratize access to herself. The territory of woman's place in marriage is being demarcated. The lines that are drawn dispossess her of herself, making her the property of her husband, but only in an unstable and embattled way.

The chorus's speech in act III has drawn a good deal of critical attention because it is at once such a cogent synthesis of discourses regarding gender, chastity, domesticity, and marital behavior, and at the same time a site of extraordinary discordance, even logical incoherence.<sup>16</sup> It is worth looking closely at the contradictions and fractures of the chorus's speech to understand the nuances of the cultural pressures Mariam must confront. The chorus advises that to be suitably subordinate a wife must "bare herself of power as well as will": in the very act of becoming her husband's property, she performs a striptease, exposing herself. Of course, the chorus's formulation of woman's role in this instance assumes she has a "self" to bare—but where does it lie and how are its boundaries fixed if not by "will" and "power"? The chorus asserts that in marriage women "give themselves" and give as well thoughts that once were their "own." The pressure to imagine a subject abandoning its property in itself leads to the immediate, consequent, threatening imagination of the self-splitting that would attend resistance: "Or give they but their body, not their mind?" The question is double-edged in that it suggests the possibility it would preclude. The chorus seeks to ensure that legal doctrine will extend into that place conceived of as the woman's interior, her "self" figured as her mind; like Puritan sermons and Renaissance educational literature for women, the chorus attempts to ensure its structures will be internalized by Mariam. But there is no way to simultaneously imagine a proprietary selfhood for women before marriage which would allow them to perform such internalizing, figured in the speech as acts of giving and reserving, and the absolute effacement of that self in marriage. Either

women have selves to colonize, and so are able either to judge where to “give” themselves, or to resist “usurpation” by preserving what is their “own,” their thoughts; or they do not, and so cannot fully participate in this legal state by the kinds of voluntary acts the chorus wishes to depict. The overloaded term “proper self” best conveys the problem, since it at once signifies women’s “properness” and chastity in marriage, yet uses the language of possession to insist that they might continue only by virtue of restraint and loss of freedom to have a self in marriage. In sum, given competing notions about how the transition from single to married woman is negotiated, descriptions of a wife’s “place” turn out to be incompatible with any notion of “constancy” or consistent, stable subjectivity.

Another paradox of the chorus’s advice to Mariam is that the appeal it makes is precisely to her desire for fame, glory, and honor—those qualities associated with public speech acts such as the ones Mariam refers to in the play’s opening lines or Cary’s own act of writing and publishing this play.<sup>17</sup> If Mariam wishes to be “more glorious,” she must not struggle to be free; if she speaks to any but her husband, she damages her “fame,” “blots” her glory, and wounds her honor. She engages in acts which mimic men’s achievements on the battlefield. But with no external enemy she has no target for real action, and so becomes her own aggressor. On the one hand, she is advised not to take up arms; on the other, she is encouraged to aspire to the same qualities gained through the masculine exercise of war. Like so much of the chorus’s speech, these choices are contradictory, and leave no middle ground for Mariam to occupy.

Throughout its first two-thirds, the *Tragedy of Mariam* focuses primarily on Mariam’s internal vacillations about her feelings for her husband, and uses lengthy soliloquies to create and dramatize the internal space of its heroine.<sup>18</sup> The play portrays Mariam’s lack of consistent emotion and response as a problem produced by social and political pressures exerted on the gendered self. Mariam consciously thematizes the disintegration of her “self,” locating the formation of her own subjectivity in Herod’s tyrannical rule over his kingdom, her family, and herself. She speaks of his influence as an “education” which proffered competing lessons:

blame me not, for Herod’s jealousy  
Had power even constancy itself to change:  
For he, by barring me from liberty,  
To shun my ranging, taught me first to range.

But yet too chaste a scholar was my heart,  
 To learn to love another than my lord:  
 To leave his love, my lesson's former part,  
 I quickly learn'd, the other I abhorr'd.

(I.23-30)

While Herod wields power enough to change “even constancy itself,” Mariam claims he does not have the power to change her constant love—it belongs to her, it is her “own.” She insists he cannot alienate her from her “self” in the same way that he separates constancy, or chastity, from itself. Yet Herod does manage to affect Mariam’s identity in that she accepts a part of his lesson, to “hate” his “love” (to vacate his bed) when his “true affection” is hidden, absent from sight, obscured by his tyrannical presence.

Mariam’s soliloquy reflects on a struggle for possession of self, a struggle in which she can only partially resist Herod’s dictation of the self she should have. But because her speeches repeatedly degenerate into self-recrimination, it becomes clear that Mariam’s self depends upon the internalization of the very patterns she tries to overcome by projecting onto her husband: she continues to value chastity, constancy, even love. Mariam has two “teachers,” her self and her husband, who compete for dominion, but only succeed in making the interior space she seeks to defend uninhabitable. Because Herod is the embodiment of the patriarchal structures of family and kingdom upon which her definition of self is based, Mariam cannot simply allow her aggression and hatred to find its object in Herod. By not allowing her anger to mean anything, to have an outward effect, Mariam shows that she is trapped by her need to live up to patriarchal ideals of femininity. She may claim that “I had rather still be foe than friend / To him that saves for hate, and kills for love” (lines 61-2), but for such a sentiment she has already established a context in which all aggression against Herod is “improper” and stems from her own error. As soon as Mariam’s anger finds expression, it is undermined, contained, and channeled into self-directed angry emotion.

Mariam’s suppression of aggressive anger can be explained by referring to the play’s ambivalence over the doubling of patriarchal domestic order in an absolutist political order.<sup>19</sup> Her relationship to patriarchal construction of her character cannot be simply oppositional. Although Herod’s existence means suffering, being torn by incompatible emotions, and ultimately Mariam’s physical destruction, and although his presence

teaches her to hate, the prospect of Herod's death conjures the specter of a world radically lacking a structure against which Mariam's subjectivity and consequently her intellect and emotion could be constructed. Without Herod, Mariam has neither husband nor monarch, a fact which relegates her "self" to an abyss where meaningful identity disappears. Patriarchy may, in this play, be identified as insupportable tyranny, but it is patriarchy, embodied in her tyrant husband, that creates the ground upon which Mariam builds her sense of individual interiority; it is from patriarchal ideals that she derives her sense of a constant self, however illusory that sense may be. It is, after all, in the speech I have quoted above, the lesson of chastity, patriarchy's cultural imperative for women, that her heart, her self, asserts over Herod's lessons in loss of liberty.

I have to this point discussed only the play's construction of Mariam's identity to discover what basic tensions shape Mariam as a gendered subject. What Mariam's soliloquies demonstrate is that she must be understood through her relationship to her husband, Herod, the despotic king of Jerusalem. To say this is not to marginalize Mariam, although some early critics of the play have occasionally done just this; rather I intend to show that in Cary's play the gendered subject is the progeny of a sociopolitical matrix, bred from the need to "naturalize" absolute political rule as an essential form of patriarchy. That is, I wish to describe Mariam's identity as a political subject, the product of political as well as of domestic ideology—or rather, as the product of the intersection of these two realms of ideological discourse. The source and plot of Cary's play indicate that Mariam's subjectivity is the site for the mutually constitutive positive power of absolutism and patriarchy.

The hostility Herod's family and followers show toward him, his secrecy and jealousy, his frequent departures and frenzied, defensive decrees upon each return, are all aspects of conduct commonly ascribed by Renaissance writing on government to the tyrant. In *The book named the governor*, Sir Thomas Elyot urges benevolence upon rulers, citing the Athenians' massacre of their "thirty tyrants" under Lacedaemonian rule, and referring to Alexander of Pherae, who "with his most foolish jealousy, converted [his wife's] love into hatred," inspiring her to have him murdered by his own subjects.<sup>20</sup> Jean Bodin, whose *Six Books of a Commonweale* had already influenced English political theory before it was translated into English in 1606, describes the insecurity of the tyrant: "[I]n truth live they most miserably, if their life be so to be called, which live in continuall feare . . .

Neither may hee repose any trust or confidence in his friends, unto whom he is himself oftentimes a traytour and disloyall, causing them for the least suspition to be slaine."<sup>21</sup>

Early modern culture's preoccupation with tyranny is the offshoot of its concern with absolutism. Tragic form offers the arena in which the dissolution, the collapse of meaning within this theory of sovereignty is enacted. The absolute monarch in theory mirrors God in a religious hierarchy which makes the king God's representative on earth. In such a model, however, the king may also become uniquely and absolutely self-determining; consequently, in tragic representations of the monarch, "the king is the only character really free to choose and therefore to *act*."<sup>22</sup> Such freedom also makes the monarch indistinguishable from the tyrant—and carries with it the possibility that the monarch may be unable to exert sufficient control over himself to be capable of governing well. Cary's portrayal of Herod, his endless distrust and his final judgment "for the least suspition" to execute her, fully realizes the traditional attributes of the tyrant, but does not discount Herod's right to rule. Rather, his tyranny is figured as the inevitable extension of his claim to absolute power, whether over Mariam herself, or over his subjects generally.

By the time Cary's play was published, James I had reaffirmed the importance of absolute rule in England in response to the threat of unrest early in his reign. His succession was controversial; thus, immediate challenges to his right to rule, compounded by wide-spread growing strife and financial troubles, spurred James and his supporters to clearly and emphatically articulate a doctrine of divinely ordained patriarchal absolutism. As Gordon Schochet notes, "only in defense of absolutism [did] patriarchalism assum[e] its full dimensions."<sup>23</sup> In *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, James naturalizes the king's paternal role: "By the Law of Nature the King becomes a naturall Father to all his Lieges at his Coronation: And as the Father of his fatherly duty is bound to care for the nourishing, education, and vertuous government of his children; even so is the King bound to care for all his subjects."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the clearest articulation of James's symbolic relationship to his people comes in his speech to Parliament in 1603: "What God hath conioyned then, let no man separate. I am the Husband, and all the whole Isle is my lawfull Wife."<sup>25</sup>

However, the paternal and spousal metaphors mobilized by James I and others to convey the king's relationship to his people were neither simple nor uncontested. Lawrence Stone

confidently asserts that “what had previously been a real threat to the political order [familial patriarchy] was thus neatly transformed into a formidable buttress to it.”<sup>26</sup> Yet this statement obscures not only the continued and significant use of familial models of patriarchy to undermine the efficacy of monarchy’s claims to absolute authority, but also the social and theological problems created by founding political authority in patriarchy. In effect, the very term “patriarch” was so overdetermined for early modern culture that it was inherently unstable. If the king, God, and the head of a family are all patriarchs, they are also potentially competitive with one another. The familial patriarch, who owes allegiance and absolute obedience to the king but is expected to rule as a mirror-image of the king within his domestic sphere, is at once absolutely powerful (in relation to his “subjects”) and absolutely powerless (in relation to his king). The consequences of this predicament are addressed in the many tortuous attempts by writers evolving theories of absolutism to explain the limits on subjects’ power to rebel against tyranny.

Political theorists defending absolute monarchy based on the “natural” model of familial relations encounter some of the same obstacles with which conduct literature was faced where the role of the wife and mother is concerned. To what extent is the wife as a “parent” (who assumes a position of power with regard to her children) her husband’s equal? Constance Jordan notes that the writings of apologists for absolute monarchy “tended to elide the uxorial dimension of the citizenry entirely and to focus on its infantile character exclusively.”<sup>27</sup> Like the majority of Renaissance thinkers and conduct-book writers, political theorists gave husbands authority over their wives, but maintained that wives had some power analogous but not equal with that of the patriarch within the family itself. The dispute over a wife’s rights and powers as opposed to her subjection to her husband’s displaces the confusion and perplexity political and theological writers faced regarding the male subject’s analogous rights and powers, which had to be balanced against the need for their absolute and unquestioning obedience to the monarch. The wife at home, like the husband and father at court, occupies a double and contradictory position relative to a single superior and a set of subordinates. The complexity of roles created for men and women in a patriarchal society ruled by an absolute monarch was further intensified by religious belief. Puritan faith asserted the equality of men and women before God: the only true “father” was God. Such a perspective

would hardly have been easily marshaled to the defense of absolute monarchy based on the patriarchal model.

I have argued that Cary's tragedy represents patriarchy as a flawed system: the kind of subjectivity it imposes on dependents is proof of its inadequacy as a theory of government. While the play envisions chaos for Mariam and for Herod's other subjects without the patriarchal structures upon which identity depends, Cary exposes the fallacy of assuming that patriarchy or the absolute rule which figures itself as a form of patriarchy are themselves truly workable as political practice. This order, which reproduces the familial relationships in a broad political arena, must also reproduce the fissures, inconsistencies, and repressions of domestic patriarchy. Such a process is dangerous—it makes the potential for explosive rupture a systemic fact. If James's doctrine of patriarchal absolutism was intended to reunite a country and restore "natural" hierarchy to government, it did so, Cary's play submits, at the cost of introducing structural instability to the governing apparatus. In the remainder of this essay I wish to analyze the *Tragedy of Mariam's* critique of patriarchal absolutism accomplished in its contrast of Mariam's character with that of Salome, Constabarus's wife and Herod's sister.

With Herod's return to Jerusalem in Act IV, Mariam's depiction of the competing "lessons" that have shaped her character are acted out in dialogue:

*Herod.* I will not speak, unless to be believ'd,  
This froward humor 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.

*Herod.* By heav'n you vex me, build not on my love.

*Mariam.* I will not build on so unstable ground.

(IV.139-48)

This dialogue enacts the pressure Mariam dramatized in her opening speeches: Herod wishes to educate her in dissembling, essentially in acting the part of the good wife. Her response is to assert a stable and unified self, which resists any detachment

of mind (or emotion or behavior) from outward appearance: Mariam “cannot frame disguise” she claims, doubling the dissimulation necessary to give her husband the signs of affection he wants. She accuses Herod instead of “unstable” love, the “ground” upon which her behavior is built. Her accusation, however, encompasses the paradox of female identity formed within patriarchal structures: Herod’s love is unstable. He promises Mariam she will find evidence of his love in his preference for her above all others, using a term like “exile” which at the same time reflects his monarchical function and prerogative; thwarted by her honesty, he warns her not to “build” on his love because it changes with her own ability to anger him. Herod’s feeling for Mariam is founded in possessiveness and obsessive jealousy as well as in a battle for absolute domestic and political power over an unruly wife and subject. Although he insists he “will not speak unless to be believed,” Herod shows that, unlike his wife, he is capable of dissimulating by putting on a pleasant face throughout this scene to discourage Mariam’s persistent hatred. But first, Herod embodies here precisely the qualities that define the absolute monarch (who, after all, must command the absolute loyalty of subjects without allowing them to presume too far, and whose slightest whims are law); and second, there is no alternate ground to Herod’s dissembling, lying, tyrannical love upon which Mariam can construct a “self,” either domestically or politically. Her husband’s rule must be reflected and reproduced in her behavior, just as her king’s identity, even the very definition of absolutism, manifests itself in her own. Thus, her assertion of a unified, “honest” self reflects only a momentary construction of identity in resistance to Herod’s attempts to define her otherwise, a construction that cannot be perpetual or complete, because it is always framed by the radically unstable pressures of Herod’s political and domestic patriarchal power.

Salome is a crucial figure in this play because she acts as a direct foil to Mariam,<sup>28</sup> discounting the propriety Mariam embodies as obedience to illogical rules. Salome portrays issues of gender, will, and self-determination in terms of status, wealth, and cynical manipulation of discourses of law and religion. “Shame is gone, and honour wip’d away” Salome asserts, claiming her right to divorce Constabarus, her second husband. These qualities are to Salome merely superficial layers of behavior, easily shed when circumstance demands. In her self-justification, Salome discredits any comfortable reliance on “natural” sexual

difference to warrant gender inequity: "Why should such privilege to man be given? / Or given to them, why barr'd from women then?" (I.305-6). More disturbing to the type of paradigm for gender roles articulated by the chorus, however, is the series of propositions she offers, that virtue is skin deep, that women should be equal to men for "cannot women hate as well as men?" (I.308), that freedom is for the rich only since "the law was made for none but who are poor" (I.312). Her assertions conjure above all the possibility that if rich women can buy their way to "freedom" from gendered legal constraints, then gender difference is a manufactured structure, less significant than class or economic status. Salome offers an egalitarian fantasy, disruptive of tradition, of "custom"—in her view, there is no essential difference between men and women, or even between different ranks of men, only the distinction conferred by wealth, goods, political power. Salome's speech confutes theories based on "natural" order or natural categories, pointing out that all relationships are constructed, and thus manipulable by the individual.

Her recognition of the artificiality of gender differences allows Salome to exert an appropriately "feminine" influence over her brother, gaining the benefits of an access to Herod which, by the chorus's judgment, Mariam should have. At the same time, Salome successfully defies the patriarchal order, both domestically and politically, by recognizing its inconsistencies, refusing to allow any code to define and contain her. She ultimately murders her husband. She becomes the advisor whose counsel provokes and intensifies Herod's rage at Mariam, her hated rival. Salome is rewarded for being able to read and reproduce the logical extremes of absolute rule: her behavior is self-consciously the product, not the antithesis, of both familial patriarchy and political tyranny, and so achieves a productive symbiosis with her brother's jealous despotism. She claims she will overthrow "custom" and eradicate inherent difference all in the name of radical selfishness which exactly mirrors her brother's self-interested irrationality. She correspondingly obtains considerable sway over Herod: the dissimulation he wished Mariam to engage in, Salome can produce, and Herod proves unable to resist that. As foil to Mariam, Salome introduces the notion that the most successful position for a woman within a patriarchal society headed by an absolute ruler is one which exploits the artificiality of the one by mimicking the worst excesses of the other.

Salome's seductive intervention in Herod's jealous ramblings

about Mariam resembles that of Iago in *Othello*.<sup>29</sup> Because she is a female character, however, she evokes the female villains created by another writer of closet dramas, Fulke Greville. While Greville's characters are extremes of evil, manipulating kings and plotting their downfall, monstrous in part precisely because they are women, they are also vehicles of political and philosophical commentary. Hala in *Alaham* and Rossa in *Mustapha* are also aware of, and able to manipulate ideologies of gender and state for their own ends. Hala plots horrific revenge on her husband, Alaham, all the while dissembling proper wifely behavior; like Salome, Hala intends to "Question the yoke of Princes, husband, law."<sup>30</sup> In *Mustapha*, Rossa plots to "alter Empire, and Succession"<sup>31</sup> by convincing Soliman that his son by a previous marriage, Mustapha, is guilty of treason, thereby making her own son heir to the throne. Appropriating and manipulating the metaphors of monarchical rule, she usurps Soliman's power to create and destroy, to give and take life. Soliman tells her "In Kings the secrets of Creation rest,"<sup>32</sup> referring at once to his physical, fatherly power over his son and to his spiritual mirroring of God's power in a worldly throne. But it is Rossa who exploits the abyss between these two types of power. She hovers at Soliman's ear, offering corrupting hints about his son's treachery. If we look at Rossa's self-representation in the play, we find a woman who, like Salome in Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam*, is fully aware of and willing to assume the language of monarchical prerogative. "My chiefest end," she tells her son Rosten, "Is, first to fix this World on my Succession; / Next so to alter, plant, remove, create, / That I, not he, may fashion this Estate."<sup>33</sup> Rossa removes control and authority over the issue of succession from Soliman, substituting her own children and her own dominion for the king's. In so doing, she takes over the metaphoric apparatus of kingship—rather than the king, who is traditionally figured as the cultivator who tends the garden of his country, she becomes the one who plants, prunes, creates.

Female characters like Salome, Hala, and Rossa become monstrous and unnatural precisely because they inhabit that gray area early modern theories of absolutist patriarchal monarchy find so difficult fully to account for in their insistence upon family and state as mirror images. Subordinate because of their sex, yet equal in deviousness, they reflect cynically on their roles and their monarchs' weaknesses. Endowed with ambition, these characters reveal the dangers of relying on the household/state analogy to explain power relations, and they demonstrate the weakness of the absolute monarch—his susceptibility to corrupt

manipulation by someone able and willing to “build on the unstable ground” of the king’s will. Of course Salome is Herod’s sister, not his wife; yet I think Cary’s play emphasizes Salome’s position as Constabarus’s wife, divorced once already, in part to fix the source of her skill in influencing Herod in her intentional subversion of the marital bond.

Salome’s role is most Iago-like, on the other hand, when she incites Herod’s vengeance to fever pitch by echoing the “unkind conceits” he thought to have banished with Mariam’s capitulation. While reviling Mariam for having a mouth that “will ope to ev’ry stranger’s ear” (IV.434), Herod blindly and willingly opens his own to his sister’s manipulations:

*Herod.* Send word she shall not die. Her cheek a bush—  
Nay, then I see indeed you mark’d it not.

*Salome.* ’Tis very fair, but yet will never blush,  
Though foul dishonours do her forehead blot.

*Herod.* Then let her die, ’tis very true indeed,  
And for this fault alone shall Mariam bleed.

*Salome.* What fault, my Lord?

*Herod.* What fault is’t? You that ask,  
If you be ignorant I know of none.

(IV.403-10)

Salome finally succeeds in securing Herod’s command for Mariam’s death, and in her success exposes the impotence of the absolute monarch whose political power is inextricable from his domestic relations.

The chorus’s advice to Mariam about the duty and nature of a wife exposes the inconsistencies in theories of domestic order; Salome’s behavior and her explanations for it expose the contradictions inherent in ideals of absolutism, as well as in the forms of patriarchal authority in which absolute monarchy is grounded. While Herod may have a legal right as husband and monarch to dispose of his wife and sister, the play suggests that containing either is difficult and perhaps ultimately impossible. By the close of the play, Mariam is on her way to her execution to be made a public spectacle. It is difficult to tell what her crime has been: consistent with the fragmenting logic of patriarchy characteristic of the play, Herod cannot decide whether she is guilty of treason, of adultery, or simply of talking too much—because, of course, according to the doctrine which makes domestic and political patriarchy mirror images of one another, these crimes are indistinguishable. But, perhaps as a last proof

of patriarchal absolutism's instability, Herod's irrevocable decision regarding his wife causes his descent into indecisiveness and confusion:

Here, take her to her death. Come back, come back,  
 What meant I to deprive the world of light:  
 To muffle Jewry in the foulest black,  
 That ever was an opposite to white?

.....  
 Well, let her go, but yet she shall not die;  
 I cannot think she meant to poison me.

(IV. 235-56)

Mariam's last appearance instead shows her remarkably consistent pursuit of a final location for resistance. She does so by exploiting the gradual disintegration of varying definitions of selfhood much of the play has examined: at her death, Mariam takes refuge in the abstract, in the constancy—and solitude—of her soul.<sup>34</sup> To recapitulate the pattern of her resistance, in the course of the play, Mariam first withdraws from Herod by denying him access to her body; then, when that retreat merely generates more divisive pressures, both internal and external, she claims the space of her mind to be her own. Her mind, however, is also beset, first by the competing "lessons" learned during her marriage to Herod, then by Herod himself in his attempts to mold her to his desires. At the play's close, she marks her soul as the final step in this process:

But I did think because I knew me chaste,  
 One virtue for a woman might suffice.  
 That mind for glory of our sex might stand,  
 Wherein humility and chastity  
 Doth march with equal paces hand in hand.  
 But one, if single seen, who setteth by?  
 And I had singly one, but 'tis my joy,  
 That I was ever innocent, though sour:  
 And therefore can they but my life destroy,  
 My soul is free from adversary's power.

(IV. 561-70)

In this speech, Mariam still searches for the stability of unity, even if it only comes in finding she has one solitary virtue. It may not be too extreme to say that her picture of the "glory" that might be had if humility and chastity walk "hand in hand"

evokes the image of the companionable marriage she has found unattainable (because, if the rest of the play is not forgotten at this point, that image is only illusion). If so, the last image of marriage the play offers is one abstracted from any material political context, one which does not accommodate its culture's necessary conjunction of domestic and political harmony. Against the need to be "multiple"—to have not one, but many virtues in order to exist within the system of patriarchal gender roles—Mariam sets the single, isolated space of her soul.

Because Mariam cannot envision a place outside the system which creates conflicting versions of her self, and cannot, as Salome does, ruthlessly discard virtue altogether, she discovers that the only "proper" place for a "proper" woman is outside of both body and mind. To be "free from adversaries power" at once recalls the discourse of colonization and masculine aggression which characterized the chorus's speech, and rewrites that discourse as a wholly spiritual battle, liberated from the contradictions involved in imagining physical defense. Rather than affirming Cary's childhood formulation of domestic counsel, which envisioned the political intervention possible through the limited channel between family members of different genders, Cary's play accounts for the difference marriage makes to women's construction of both domestic and political subjectivity, and finds the convergence of discourses about the patriarchal household with discourses about monarchy and the state inimical to her utopian childhood ideal. Both Mariam's silencing in martyrdom and Salome's rhetorical skill in *The Tragedy of Mariam* should be read as part of the play's larger critique of an absolutist political system dependent for its legitimation upon a domestic patriarchy which generates rather than resolves instability in its subjects. This play advances the notion that any regime which demands of women purity and silence, yet is susceptible to seduction by their most cynical rhetoric, must look within itself for the causes of political rebellion as well as of domestic disaffection.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"The Lady Falkland: Her Life by One of Her Daughters," in *The Tragedy of Mariam: The Fair Queen of Jewry*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), pp. 183-275, 187.

<sup>2</sup>"The Lady Falkland: Her Life," p. 198.

<sup>3</sup>William Whately, *A Bride-Bush or A Wedding Sermon* (Amsterdam: Walter J. Johnson, 1975), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>John Heydon, *Advice to a Daughter: in opposition to Advice to a Sonne* (London, 1658), p. 85.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1622), p. 281.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Salter, *Mirrhour of Modestie*, ed. Janis Butler Holm (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987).

<sup>8</sup>Gouge, pp. 281-2.

<sup>9</sup>Neo-Senecan drama was introduced into England with Mary Sidney's translation of Robert Garnier's *Marc Antoine*, published in 1592. Garnier's work was directed at a court audience. Margaret Hannay has suggested that Sidney intended the genre as one suitable to advising the monarch; see Margaret Hannay, *Philip's Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 45-56, 126. For a detailed description of the closet drama in England, see H. B. Charlton, *The Senecan Tradition in Renaissance Tragedy* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1946); for a discussion of neo-Senecan drama after the style of Garnier, see Alexander Witherspoon, *The Influence of Robert Garnier on Elizabethan Drama* (New York: Phaeton Press, 1924, rpt. 1968).

<sup>10</sup>See Ferguson's "A Room Not Their Own: Renaissance Women as Readers and Writers," in *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988); and "Running On With Almost Public Voice: The Case of 'E.C.,'" in *Tradition and the Talents of Women*, ed. Florence Howe (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 37-67.

<sup>11</sup>Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, ed. Weller and Ferguson, l.i.1-8. All further references to the play are to this edition by act and line number.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas Elyot, *Defence of Good Women*, rpt. in *The Feminist Controversy of the Renaissance* (Delmar NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1980), intro. by Diane Bornstein, no page numbers.

<sup>13</sup>Constance Jordan discusses the role of "protest" and speech in early modern feminist polemics in *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 297-307.

<sup>14</sup>Ferguson, "A Room Not Their Own," p. 108; Betty Travitsky, "The *Feme Covert* in Elizabeth Cary's *Mariam*," in *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Carole Levin and Jeanie Watson (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 184-96.

<sup>15</sup>Ferguson, "A Room Not Their Own," p. 109 and Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 171-5.

<sup>16</sup>See Margaret Ferguson, "The Spectre of Resistance, *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613)," in *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 235-50; in *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), Elaine V. Beilin discusses *Mariam* as torn between obedience as a wife and subject, and rebellion to assert her voice and sense of self, pp. 164-76. Belsey notes that the difficulties raised by the chorus's speech persist unresolved throughout the play so that it "seems to oscillate between endorsement and disapproval of *Mariam's* defiance" (p. 174).

<sup>17</sup>Ferguson concludes that the play's representations of *Mariam's* "'public' speech den[y] this very play-text's right to exist" ("A Room Not Their Own," p. 108).

<sup>18</sup>Beilin points out that *Mariam* seems more psychologically complex than

any other character in the play (p. 166). That effect is produced by her soliloquies. The paradoxes and excesses of Mariam's soliloquies might be simply structural: Catherine Belsey has argued that the unified, interior self which distinguishes the Renaissance construction of self from that typical of Medieval morality and mystery plays is always illusory, because the subject speaking is always more than, or other than what can be spoken (pp. 42-54). For Belsey, lack of unity is inherent in the attempt to speak "interiority" into being on the stage, and thus is embedded in the structures of soliloquy.

<sup>19</sup>Mary Ellen Lamb, in *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 127-32, speculates that the kind of stoic rage Mariam typifies in her anger over Herod, which Lamb analyzes in the context of Mary Sidney's *Tragedie of Antonie*, formulates a heroics of constancy. Lamb borrows Gordon Braden's excellent reading of stoic anger in his *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985). Both these authors offer useful perspectives on Mariam's emotional state. Cary's revision of the stoical tradition insists upon the intersection of gendered personal and political identity, and its outcome, as I suggest here, is a critique of patriarchy's effects on both gender- and state-oriented subject-formation.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas Elyot, *The book named the governor* (Menston: Scolar Press, 1970), pp. 128-9.

<sup>21</sup>Jean Bodin, *The Six Books of a Commonweale*, ed. Kenneth Douglas McRae (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), p. 214.

<sup>22</sup>This theory of tragedy and the quote are from Franco Moretti's *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller (New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 42-82, 45.

<sup>23</sup>Gordon J. Schochet, *Patriarchalism in Political Thought: The Authoritarian Family and Political Speculation and Attitudes, Especially in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), p. 86.

<sup>24</sup>*The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles Howard McIlwain (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), pp. 55-6.

<sup>25</sup>*Political Works*, p. 272.

<sup>26</sup>Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 154.

<sup>27</sup>Constance Jordan, "The Household and the State: Transformations in the Representation of an Analogy from Aristotle to James I," *MLQ* 54, 3 (September 1993): 307-26, 315.

<sup>28</sup>In an early study of the play, "Elizabeth Cary, Renaissance Playwright" in *TSL* 18, 4 (Winter 1977): 601-8, Nancy Cotton Pearse suggests reading Salome and Mariam as two sides to Cary's personality. Travitsky, in "The *Feme Covert*," observes that "Mariam's fatal lesson . . . is not visited universally on the women of the play," and registers her "monstrosity" in some detail (pp. 190-2). Ferguson, in "The Spectre of Resistance," who considers Salome to be "Vice-like" (p. 237) in the ethical extreme she represents, also analyzes Salome's adept manipulation of expected patterns of private and public speech. Salome is not alone in opposing Herod: Pheroras, his coregent, plots to marry a slave girl, rather than his politically acceptable betrothed, and Constabarus, Salome's husband, plots to free Babas's sons, whom Herod had once ordered killed, but whom Constabarus has been protecting. These plots fail, however, while Salome's succeeds, a fact I believe has enormous significance to the play's construction of state and domestic relationships.

<sup>29</sup>See Weller and Ferguson, pp. 41-3, for speculation of the relationship between Salome and Iago.

<sup>30</sup>*Alaham*, p. 24, in *Certain Learned and Elegant Workes (1633) by Fulke Greville* (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1990).

<sup>31</sup>*Mustapha*, in *Certain Learned and Elegant Workes*, p. 155.

<sup>32</sup>*Mustapha*, p. 132.

<sup>33</sup>*Mustapha*, p. 121.

<sup>34</sup>I accept Beilin's reading of Mariam's last stand, its isolated triumph and "spiritual heroism" (p. 171) but I also read her final withdrawal as specifically from Herod and the structures of monarchy, the only frame of reference from which her worldly existence can derive an identity.

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