

# Performing Disobedience: Domestic Transgressions and Political Transformation in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to probe instances of dramatic self-construction through the performance of disobedience as enacted by the female protagonists of Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, critically exploring, in close relation to one another, Mariam's changing self-presentation from public loquacity to purposeful stoic silence, and Salome's transgression of the sex-gender system. As will be argued, these two performances of female subjectivity trigger a current of social change by destabilizing the naturalized patriarchal authority that sustains political order. For, as it will be explored, the public self-construction of feminine identities in Cary's play—mostly through the utterance of a public speech—creates a dramatic and textual space in which rebellious and transformative notions of female selfhood can negotiate the timely tensions between moral permanence and political change.

Keywords: Elizabeth Cary; *The Tragedy of Mariam*; closet drama; Renaissance drama; gender studies

## 1. Introduction

In her book about women's fairy tales of the seventeenth century, Patricia Hannon argues that early modern representations of characters in-flux—specifically, female characters—have the subversive effect of undermining the social hierarchy, insofar as social order is sustained on a fixed categorization of identities and thus cannot easily accommodate the notion of multiple roles for one individual (1998: 82). The issue of a woman's identity was particularly problematic in this regard. As Catherine Belsey explained, “unless in the exceptional case of a woman as sovereign of the realm, women exercised no legal rights as members of the social body” (1985: 153). This posed a sociopolitical problem, since “neither quite recognized as adults, nor quite equated with children, women posed a problem of identity which unsettled the law” (1985: 153). The notion of female subjecthood was slippery and a cause of certain social unrest and thus, in such context, the dramatic

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representation of female characters whose identities are built through performance, that is, by means of a public self-construction that is changeable depending on circumstance, allows for the interpretation that such a theatrical construal of public female selfhood may set the ground for a political transformation of the status quo.

Following this argument, the aim of this article is to probe instances of personal change and disobedient shapes of performance as enacted by the female protagonists of Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, critically exploring, in close relation to one another, Mariam's changing self-presentation from public loquacity to purposeful stoic silence, and Salome's transgression of the sex-gender system. As will be argued, these two performances of a female public self, while seemingly divergent, simultaneously trigger a current of social change by destabilizing the naturalized patriarchal authority that sustains political order. This essay will therefore examine forms of personal transgression, domestic disobedience and political subversion that stem from the character's duplicitous behaviour, from their fluid self-defining and self-constructing performance and from the utterance of their defiant public speech, in consequence elaborating the argument that this public construction of feminine identities in Cary's play arguably creates a dramatic space in which multiple and transformative notions of female selfhood can negotiate the timely tensions between social and moral permanence on the one hand, and political change on the other.

## *2. Transgressing Privacy: Closet Drama as Public Performance*

After much recent criticism has finally drawn proper attention to it, *The Tragedy of Mariam*—an early Jacobean closet drama composed by Elizabeth Cary sometime between 1603 and 1606 (Wray 2012: 11) and first published in 1613—has become well known among early modern scholars. Following as a main source Thomas Lodge's translations of Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, Cary's play tells the story of Mariam, the second wife of Herod the Great, the tyrannous king of Judea from the year 39 to the year 4 B.C. The play takes place on a single day, when King Herod is mistakenly thought to have been killed by Caesar after a visit to Rome. When he suddenly and unexpectedly returns later on that same day, he finds Mariam unwilling to disguise the sorrow she feels at learning that her despotic husband is, after all, alive; prey to jealousy,

the king succumbs to his sister Salome's lies about a false attempt to kill him at Mariam's hand, for which he decides to have his wife beheaded. With Mariam's martyr-like execution ends a play which, as an instance of closet drama written by a female author, is unconventional within the corpus of English Renaissance theatre, but which at the same times offers a resonant view of some of the political and social anxieties regarding issues of authority and legitimacy that serve as backbone for early-modern political drama.

In fact, even though criticism on *The Tragedy of Mariam* has traditionally followed the biographical approach, mostly influenced by those editions of the play published in tandem with Cary's biography *Life*, written in 1645 by one of her daughters, most likely Lucy (Wray 2012: 5),<sup>1</sup> most recent criticism has either focused on the subject of marriage—"the battlefield of the play," as famously defined by Beilin (2014: 167)<sup>2</sup>—or drawn into perspective "the play's political and intellectual contexts" (Clarke 1998: 179). In parallel, however, authors such as Clarke have proposed bringing together these two places of

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<sup>1</sup> Wray criticizes how this approach, which has focused on detecting personal resonances in the play, has prioritized "a one-dimensional model of understanding" (2012: 6) that has focused on two identifications between the play and Cary's life: her marital tribulations and her religious dissent. Both are however difficult to sustain: firstly, because the writing of the play predates Cary's debatable marriage troubles and her conversion to Catholicism, and secondly because, as Wray argues, "any biographical reading is compromised because of the partiality of the extant material" (2012: 7). *Life* is, after all, "quasi-hagiographic" (2012: 5), "highly crafted and self-justifying" (2012: 7-8) and, as Wolf writes, engaged in "discrimination," "interpretation" and "omission" (qt. in Wray 2012: 8). The biographical approach to the play is however inescapable when revising the critical reception of the play. Noteworthy examples of this critical view are Fischer's "Elizabeth Cary and Tyranny, Domestic and Religious" (1985) and Ferguson's "Running On with Almost Public Voice: The Case of E.C." (1991).

<sup>2</sup> Besides Beilin, some of the most eloquent studies that have scrutinized the gendered conflict within the institution of marriage as presented in Cary's play are Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1985), Lewalski's *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (1993), Quilligan's "Staging Gender: William Shakespeare and Elizabeth Cary" (1993), and Callaghan's "Re-reading Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*" (1994).

signification, insightfully noting “the ideological importance of marriage within patriarchal government” (1998: 179). Clarke elaborates:

...marriage in the play can be read as a multiply nuanced metaphor, that gestures towards the public world of politics and the ‘private’ world of the family so as to reveal their interdependence and thereby adumbrate the role of women in the public sphere as guarantors and legitimators of male supremacy. Mariam’s treatment of the problematics of the obligations and bonds of a marriage that is public and dynastic enables Cary to consider the political nature of allegiance and fidelity, and the grounds upon which such bonds may be dissolved. (Clarke 1998: 179)

This is the preferred analysis of this essay as well, one that considers what Miller, following Pollock, defined as the “domestic politics” (1997: 353) of the play, or the “competing structures of familial authority” (1997: 353). For it is that competition for power within the household that allows for the identification between Cary’s public textual performance as an author of closet drama and the political rebellion enacted by her protagonists’ silences and speeches. As Miller carefully explains, *The Tragedy of Mariam* is a cultural product of the upper middle class domestic structures that reared women in a double perspective: training them for the managing of estate and decision-making in household-related business, while simultaneously mandating chastity, silence and obedience (1997: 353). This paradox or duplicity in female instruction—subjection and independence—created an obvious conflict when a woman’s independent thought and actions came into struggle with her husband’s authority. As Pollock explained, the solution came by ensuring that women would “revert to secondary status whenever it was enjoined and hence not threaten the ruling supremacy of their husbands” (qt. in Miller 1997: 253).

Bearing in mind these domestic politics, then, one may situate Cary’s voice as an author—the author of the first original play written by a woman published in England—in the context of her circumstances as a member of a propertied class whose upbringing allowed her to “claim [an] independent speaking position” (Miller 1997: 354). Whether her textual performance in the writing and publishing of the play threatens or not the ground of male supremacy is however a matter for further discussion. Indeed, as Clarke eloquently argues, closet drama is a genre positioned in the “intersection between publication on the one hand, and private performance on the other” (Clarke 1998: 179). And, as it pertains to the argument of this essay, the particularities of closet drama—and

specifically, of its oxymoronic reality as a “private performance”—are in fact a matter of consequence when it comes to elucidating the play’s take on female duplicity and public self-construction as a way for political transformation.

Miranda Garo writes that “closet drama was a particularly powerful vehicle for female expression because it had a reputation for falling safely within proper household boundaries” (2012: 365). Yet, as she elaborates, such a private space was not completely privatized, because “if feminine spaces were fully privatized, they would function solely under feminine governance [...] Thus the closet, as a domestic enclosure with limited admission, also needed to provide a site of performative exposure” (2012: 366). The closet was thus not a private space at all, but a place of performance, a space for feminine education where women were supposed to act their gender according to the instructions provided in the conduct manuals, that is, the voice of masculine authority that supervised the feminine private space through assigning or forbidding texts for women (Garo 2012: 366). This of course entailed a specific kind of deliberate female performance that is crucial to understanding *The Tragedy of Mariam*. Closet drama, as a form of textual performance, certifies that, even within the private boundaries of the domestic closet, a woman “must perform overtly for those watching and interpreting her” (2012: 366). And still, the text itself, the act of creating and performing Cary’s play, simultaneously defies that notion.

This article aims to discuss the social and political transgressions contained in the duplicitous and fluid feminine performances in Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*, but such textual analysis would be considerably incomplete without addressing the contextual reality of Cary’s own textual performance through publication, which mirrors the characters’ performative rebellion. As Garo explains, “using closet drama as a vehicle, Cary could obey rules of silence and privacy by writing a didactic text intended for household reading. At the same time, she could transgress expectations of privacy and silence by producing a published document that entered into the homes of others and borrowed readers’ voices” (2012: 370). After all, *The Tragedy of Mariam* has had a “steady readership” since the seventeenth century (Straznicky 2004: 48) and even though the form of its publication—“the semi-anonymous authorship, the retracted personal dedication, the seemingly antitheatrical formalism” (2004: 48)—may suggest a strict form of control over a woman’s public

speech, it seems however that the play's marketing design was actually aimed to situate it "in relation to an elite literary discourse" (2004: 48). In Quilligan's words, "for Cary, the loosing of female breath in an imagined public spectacle was simultaneously authorial freedom and sexual shame. But that act of transgression was a play, the first to be published in English by a woman" (1993: 230). Mariam and Salome, protagonist and antagonist in Cary's play respectively, do not author a public text from within the intimacy of the male-guarded closet to disobey the feminine mandate of privacy, but they do loosen their breath. As Belsey argued,

In the family as in the state women had no single, unified, fixed position from which to speak. Possessed of immortal souls and of eminently visible bodies, parents and mistresses but also wives, they were only inconsistently identified as subjects in the discourses about them which circulated predominantly among men. In consequence, during the sixteenth century and much of the seventeenth the speech attributed to women themselves tended to be radically discontinuous, inaudible or scandalous.  
(1985: 160).

Like Cary, Mariam and Salome transgress their socially-assigned feminine space by speaking publically, but by doing so they also construct themselves theatrically. By executing their own liberating instance of textual performance, they manage to build a truly autonomous female selfhood. By performing their dramatic self through words, they are also allowed to shape a public self in-flux, to move beyond their assigned personal categories of wives and subjects; and it is that change in identity, that duplicity and malleability of the female public self as enacted in Cary's play that sets the ground for the social transformation advanced in the text and explored in this study.

### *3. Performing Silence: Mariam's Political Disruption from Within*

Mariam's personal metamorphosis throughout the play is best summarized in Nandra Perry's words, when she notes "her successful transformation from a wilful (talkative) anti-heroine into a Stoical (silent) heroine" (2008: 126). This defines her as a "passive hero," someone "free to offer a radical critique of the status quo, but not to actively disrupt it" (2008: 126). This is certainly true when analysed, as Perry does, in coalescence with the imagery of Catholic martyrdom that surrounds Mariam's character, as it posits a form of resistance in which

“exemplarity is contingent upon respect for natural hierarchies and an ability to work within rather than against the established social order” (2008: 126). As will be later explored, this is the point of divergence that separates Mariam’s and Salome’s forms of rebellion, but it is remarkable that, seemingly without breaking audience expectations of imposed female silence, Mariam’s movement from loquacity to muteness in fact enacts a form of both domestic and political disobedience, since, as Lewalski notes, in Cary’s play “political and domestic tyranny are fused in Herod the Great” (1993: 194), Mariam’s husband and usurper king. In this context, Mariam’s eventual refusal to say what her king and husband demands to hear enacts a form of rebellion that restores rather than disrupts the political status quo, precisely because Mariam’s arrogation of authority through marital disobedience sets back in order the political disorder which was the result of Herod’s illegitimate usurpation.

Margaret Ferguson notes that the play begins “by emphasizing the ruler’s illegitimacy” (2003: 266), and thus the illegitimacy of the authority that subdues Mariam as subject. King Herod is an Idumean (Cary 2012: 1), that is, an Edomite or converted Jew, who has “crept by the favour of the Romans into the Jewish monarchy” (Cary “Argument” 2012: 2-3). Metonymically identified with a snake, Herod is presented as illegitimately appointed to power thanks to his servitude to the colonizing force. He is immediately accused of having murdered Mariam’s father—“the rightful king and priest” (2012: 4)—her brother and her grandfather, all to protect his very flimsy claim to the throne, which he sustains exclusively through his right as Mariam’s husband. Indeed, as Ferguson has noted, the very wording of “The Argument” underlines the fact that Herod has appropriated a title which rightfully belongs to his wife (2003: 266): “This Mariam had a brother called Aristobolus, and, next him and Hyrcanus, his grandfather, Herod *in his wife’s right*, had the best title” (Cary “The Argument” 2012: 8-10, my italics). The claim to the throne thus belongs to Mariam, the rightful heir of the royal bloodline of Simon Maccabee and yet, it is the marital relationship between Mariam and Herod that enthrones him as rightful king and demotes her to subject. Within the power dynamics of “absolutist marriage” (Belsey 1985: 174), the legitimacy of patriarchal domination trumps the illegitimacy of Herod’s client kingship.

As Clarke argues, both early modern political theory and conduct literature focused on the notion that the family formed a primary unit that

sustained broader social and political structures, since “the politicized discourse used in conduct books posits the domestic sphere as a miniature commonwealth where (male) authority is exercised and (female) obedience is enforced” (1998: 180). This establishes a gender hierarchy visible in Cary’s play, where an absolutist political authority depends for its legitimation upon domestic patriarchal control. Herod’s political power over the colonised territory of Judea is illegitimate in terms of his blood, his religion, his traitorous crimes and even his complicity with the colonizing force; yet, his patriarchal authority over his wife seems uncontested, which gives him the right to Mariam’s rightful—in terms of blood, religion and character—claim to Judea’s governance. As León Alfar explains, “in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Herod’s rule is based on usurpation, expulsion of a first wife, and violent control of a second wife. In this play, marriage, law and monarchy are institutions that confer power only on men, and wives are provided for at the whim of the husband, who inherits his authority from the monarchical line” (2008: 86). Yet the play also presents a defiant response to that unequal distribution of power. Herod’s authority depends exclusively and excessively on patriarchal domination; thus, any disruption of his marital control can (and does) effectively destabilize the feeble political establishment. Such is the effect achieved by Mariam’s transgression, which, while respecting the natural order of things, alters the political structures by restoring legitimacy through the public performance of marital disobedience.

Ramona Wray notes that the play opens by placing “spectacular emphasis upon a speaking female sovereign and direct attention to the theme of the woman’s voice” (2012: 31).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the play opens with Mariam’s soliloquy: “How oft have I with public voice run on / To censure Rome’s last hero for deceit / Because he wept when Pompey’s life was gone, / Yet when he lived, he thought his name too great?” (Cary 2012: I.I 1-4). Wray explains these lines: “Mariam describes herself as someone used to speaking often (‘How oft’), at length (‘run on’), in public (‘with public voice’), critically (‘To censure’) and on no less a subject that the politics of empire” (2012: 31). Indeed, Mariam is directly addressing Caesar and admitting to having censured him in public for

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<sup>3</sup> This analysis is cognate with Belsey’s argument that “a wife’s right to speak, to subjectivity, to a position from which to protest, is among the central questions of Elizabeth Cary’s play” (1985: 171).

being a hypocrite when he cried after Pompey's death. But she continues: "But now I do recant, and, Roman lord, / Excuse too rash a judgement in a woman. / My sex pleads pardon; pardon then afford; / Mistaking is with us but too too common" (Cary 2012: I.I 5-8). As Wray contends, Mariam is vilifying herself for her censuring and defiant public speech, and she is doing so in a way that drives the audience's interest towards her gender (2012: 31-32). She asks for forgiveness for a transgression that she attributes to a common feminine mistake but, significantly, she does not choose to remain quiet after uttering these words: they are in fact the first eight lines in a soliloquy of seventy-eight, a public, performative monologue that epitomizes what is clearly perceived by others as Mariam's character flaw, that is, her public loquacity.

The dissonance between what Mariam says and what she does could eloquently demonstrate that, as some critics have argued, the play is "distressingly (or at its cultural moment necessarily) contradictory, especially in regard to the issue of women's silence" (Lewalski 1993: 179), but it certainly expresses through dramatic performance a certain duplicity in Mariam's character that allows her to remain within the moral boundaries associated with female silence while transgressing that particular code of behaviour. Meaningfully, the King's sister Salome, her adversary, accuses her tongue of being "so quickly moved" (Cary 2012: I.III 21), and Sohemus, a counsellor of Herod that betrays him out of loyalty and admiration for Mariam, recognizes that "Unbridled speech is Mariam's worst disgrace / And will endanger her without desert" (2012: III.III 65-66). Mariam's original transgression is thus publicly acknowledged by both friends and foes, as it clearly contravenes a social prescription the consequence of which is realizing female subjectivity. As Belsey argues, when Mariam speaks, she expresses meaning "located in a consciousness united with the utterance which is its outward expression" (1985: 172). Mariam shapes her own subjectivity by trespassing the social mandate of feminine silence. This mandate is clearly expressed by the Chorus, which conveys the dominant ideology constricting of female freedom, but also, as seen, the beliefs of Mariam herself, who also abides that prescription. Mariam's transgression is thus inextricable from a form of duplicitous behaviour that allows her to challenge the status quo from within. Still, the mandate of the Chorus is worth commenting:

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. (...)  
 Then she usurps upon another's right  
 That seeks to be by public language graced;  
 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.  
 And every mind, though free from thought of ill,  
 That out of glory seeks a worth to show,  
 When any's ears but one therewith they fill,  
 Doth in a sort her pureness overthrow. (2012: III Chorus 13-16, 19-34)

The Chorus of course gives voice to the ethical framework that embeds Mariam's tragedy but, as Garno has noted, the ideology contained in these words is cognate with that expressed by early modern conduct literature: "The Chorus and its conduct literature cohort fear the disjunction between women's interior and exterior states. According to both, women should use bodily behaviour to externalize their chastity; they should perform silence and obedience before a viewing masculine audience" (2012: 365-366). What the chorus thus expresses is not so much a condemnation of women's public speech, but a fear of what lies beneath: women's autonomous performance, a form of duplicity, of the hypocrisy that Mariam censured in Caesar and that she recognizes in her own mixed feelings, first when she believes that Herod has died—"Now do I find, by self-experience taught, / One object yields both grief and joy" (Cary 2012: I.I 9-10)—and later after she learns that he remains alive: "And must I to my prison turn again? / Oh, now I see I was an hypocrite: / I did this morning for his death complain, / And yet do mourn because he lives ere night" (Cary 2012: III.III 33-36). This moment, in the third scene of Act Three, is the moment that signals Mariam's transformation as it marks her transition into a representation of silent integrity as a constituent of her self.

Mariam's second and definitive transgression—performed through silence—subverts expectations of female silence and what it entails precisely because she recognizes the hypocritical shape of her public speech. Mariam recognises that she has pretended before and she recognizes (and confesses) the power in such performance: "I know I could enchain him with a smile / And lead him captive with a gentle word" (Cary 2012: III.III 45-46). Now she refuses to continue that

particular form of self-presentation, even though noticing that she could upend the gender hierarchy so that her husband would become her prisoner. But she declares: "I scorn my look should ever man beguile / Or other speech than meaning to afford" (2012: III.III 47-48). When she faces Herod after his return, he asks her to smile in happiness that he is back, and she replies: "I cannot frame disguise, nor ever taught / My face a look dissenting from my thought" (Cary 2012: IV.III 59-60). The audience knows for a fact this is untrue. She can indeed frame disguise, as she recognizes she has done before, but she now refuses to do so. As Quilligan writes, "Mariam can no more play her part" (1993: 226). Apparently, she is now complying with the feminine command of silent integrity, but her silence has become a direct action of disobedience, a manifestation of rebellion against her husband's authority, a refusal to "give her mind to a tyrant" (Belsey 1985: 173), and thus a subversion of the social (dis)order sustained in that tyrannical authority. As Bennett explains, and this is key to understanding the autonomy and the changing nature of Mariam's selfhood,

Mariam's ultimate resistance to oppression and tyranny is depicted as a deliberate refusal to (re)engage in dissimulation once she hears of her husband's survival and return. In order to maintain her articulation of herself as an autonomous subject, she must resist all temptations to reformulate her means of agency. Personal integrity is thus not necessarily a natural state, but a careful self-construction, a resistance to the expediency called for in both marital and political realms. (2000: 301-302)

Mariam is still playing her part, but her part has changed. Mariam's new performance of herself, defined by a deliberate and carefully constructed silence, triggers Herod's jealousy. Suspicions of dishonesty and disloyalty immediately undercut his legitimacy, fully dependent on, as argued, his patriarchal authority over Mariam. As his power falls apart, Herod falls prey to Salome's plot against Mariam and believes that she has tried to poison him. When he accuses her, Mariam's only reply is: "Is this a dream?" (Cary 2012: IV.IV 27). When he reproaches her that she has tried to kill him because she loves his counsellor Sohemus, she answers: "They can tell / That say I loved him. Mariam says not so" (2012: IV.IV 35-36). Her answer is a refusal to answer, she says what she does not say. Once again, Mariam offers a deliberate performance of a textually-constructed silence that ultimately becomes an act of disobedience and rebellion in the face of death. This, an eloquent

expression of the “martyrological imagery” (Perry 2008: 126) that adorns Mariam’s tragic demise, suggests that it is her silence and not her original bold speech that is validated in the end (Perry 2008: 126), but, as argued, her performance of silence and integrity constitutes a “refusal to conform in speech or appearance (...) [that] undoes the dynamic of power that stabilizes [Herod’s] position” (Clarke 1998: 192). The consequence is therefore the undermining of the political system, even if that transformation of the social status quo constitutes a return to legitimacy and thus to the natural order of things. In this sense, Mariam’s parallel disobedience of patriarchal mandates may be read as opposite to Salome’s wilful subversion of those same patriarchal hierarchies.

#### *4. Freed from Patriarchy: Salome’s Subversion of the Order of Things*

Following Jeanne Roberts, Boyd Berry claims that it is useful to consider that the first two acts of the play, when Herod is absent and presumed dead, “imagine or wish for a utopian absence of patriarchy” (1995: 259), since the beginning of the play “presents women acting as if freed from patriarchy” (1995: 259). In particular, Salome’s actions in this imagined world without patriarchy are vividly subversive. She expresses her desire to get divorced from her husband Constabarus because she wishes to marry her new lover, Silleus, the king of Arabia. Her desire entails breaking with the Mosaic law, which grants only men the right to repudiate their wives and divorce them at whim. Taking thus advantage of the legal indeterminacy caused by Herod’s supposed death, Salome very openly confronts Constabarus with her demands: “Thy love and admonitions I defy! / 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” (Cary 2012: I.VI 41-46). Constabarus’s reply, a reaction “both to Salome’s vociferousness and to her sexual aggression, the reverse of traditional feminine silence and chastity” (Beilin 2014: 168), could not be more eloquent:

Are Hebrew women now transformed to men?  
Why do you not as well our battles fight  
And wear our armour? Suffer this, and then  
Let all the world be topsy-turned quite!

Let fishes grave, beast swim, and birds descend;  
Let fire burn downwards whilst the earth aspires;  
Let winters heat and summer's cold offend;  
Let thistles grow on vines and grapes on briers! (Cary 2012: I.vi 47-54)

As León Alfar notes, Constabarus's words "reaffirm[] as natural a sex-gender system that putatively guarantees systems of power and inheritance" (2008: 62). In opposition to this, "Salome's seizure of male prerogative, accompanied by so cynical a view of law, shakes the proper order of things" (Bailin 2014: 167). Indeed, as far as Constabarus is concerned, Salome's arrogation of masculine power entails a transformation of the self in terms of gender identity: she has now become a man, and that metamorphosis has the effect of turning upside down the entirety of the natural world. In Constabarus's words, the rhetoric that naturalizes patriarchal hierarchies—and thus the political establishment in the play, which is sustained, as argued, solely on patriarchal domination—is quite transparent, but so is Salome's undermining of such dominant discourse when she replies: "I mean not to be led by precedent. / My will shall be to me instead of law" (Cary 2012: I.vi 79-80). Bennett has defined this moment as "an overt renunciation of legitimate authority and the status quo through a wholehearted embrace of the selfish chaos of will" (2000: 303). The result is now a disruption of social and political order towards disorder, a form of subversion not from within but against the status quo. Because Salome's "militant feminism" (Belsey 1985: 174), her wilful arrogation of masculine power, delegitimizes the naturalized sex-gender system, that is, the proper, "divinely-arranged" (Beilin 2014: 168) order of things; and yet, at the same time, her rebellion functions in parallel to Mariam's, as it thwarts, by effectively dismantling the patriarchy, Herod's absolutist marital dominion and thus his political legitimacy as the master of Mariam's right to the throne. In consequence, both political legitimacy and patriarchal authority are revealed as social constructions that can be undone, for, as Raber notes, "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" (1995: 336). Even more revolutionarily perhaps, Salome realizes and celebrates the transformative power of her actions in terms of social progress. As she declares, "Though I be first that to this course do bend, / I shall not be the last, full well I know" (Cary 2012: I.vi 61-62).

Salome initiates then a sort of sexual revolution that seems to lead society towards disorder. In this process of social revolution, her “selfish chaos of will” (Bennett 2000: 303) is fundamental, for it prevents that Salome’s speech and actions are in any way sanctioned, which contributes to the construal of her rebellion as a wilful destabilization of social order. In general terms, as Clarke argues, divorce frequently “represents the breakdown of a social and political order grounded upon the right ordering of the hierarchical relationships between man and woman, governor and subject” (1998: 183),<sup>4</sup> but in the case of Salome in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, the wish for divorce emerges from what Clarke defines as her “transgressive sexual desire and political ambition” (1998: 183). These are, of course, inadmissible grounds for the dissolution of marriage both under Judaic law and within the seventeenth century context in which the play is written, and thus critics such as Clarke have seen in Salome’s unjustifiable resistance a foil that highlights the complexities (and duplicities) of Mariam’s rejection of Herod, since Mariam is after all refusing to obey an illegitimate monarch and adulterer for reasons of conscience, without renouncing her chastity and virtue (Clarke 1998: 184). While this study fundamentally concurs, noting the differences in Mariam’s disobedience towards order and Salome’s revolution of disorder, it would also like to suggest the possibility of upending the argument, as it may be reasonable to argue that Mariam’s disobedience of conscience, in contrast with Salome’s disobedience of will, desire and ambition, actually emphasizes the power for disruption of the latter, by, among other things, underlining the political weight of chastity as a measure of female value.

While Salome’s wish to divorce is propelled by sexual desire, Mariam’s chastity is established from the very beginning. She recognizes that Herod, “by barring me from liberty / to shun my ranging, taught me first to range” (Cary 2012: I.I. 25-26), but the lesson was ineffectual: “too chaste a scholar was my heart / To learn to love another than my love” (2012: I.I. 26-27). The statement holds value morally and politically, because securing Herod’s legitimacy and the perpetuation of his bloodline depends solely on Mariam’s guaranteed chastity. As Clarke

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<sup>4</sup> As Clarke also notes, this was particularly resonant in England, where the religious schism had been sustained precisely on the dissolution of Henry VIII’s first marriage (1998: 183).

notes, “female adultery (or the suspicion of adultery) automatically impugns paternity” (1998: 186); but, given the dependence of Herod’s flimsy political legitimacy on his patriarchal authority, suspicions of sexual disloyalty also impugn the public system of hierarchies in the Kingdom of Judea. It is Salome’s false accusation that “Mariam hopes to have another King” (2012: I.III. 3) that eventually gets Mariam killed—an accusation that eloquently combines the sexual desire and political ambition that colour Salome’s own transgression “in order to propose Mariam as doubly transgressive” (Clarke 1998: 187). Indeed, her infidelity would make Herod’s political authority tumble along with his patriarchal control. Both transgressions are inextricable. When at the end of the play Herod can no longer control Mariam’s performance of silence and speech, there is only one way to execute the authority that sustains him as king, and that is to have her killed. Mariam, as already discussed, reacts by carefully constructing a deliberate performance of silent integrity but, paradoxically, that performance of integrity—which so clearly resembles Catholic martyrologies (Perry 2008: 126)—closes the circle that conjoins Mariam and Salome’s shapes of resistance, because in the end Mariam’s disobedience is also sexual, even if chaste.

As she says to her good friend Sohemus: “I will not to his love be reconciled, / With solemn vows I have forsworn his bed” (Cary 2012: III.III. 15-16). Mariam replaces the wedding vows that bind her to her husband and that sustain the political structure of the realm by private vows she makes to herself to unbind her body from Herod’s bed. Her sexual disobedience is not adultery but refusal; it preserves her autonomy and sabotages the king’s authority. It is a form of sexual rebellion that upholds her chastity. Mariam is once again contained within the ethical framework that her actions critique, but simultaneously she executes a form of sexual control over Herod that disempowers him and which places her not so much in contrast with Salome’s transgressive sexuality, but in line with it.<sup>5</sup> As Clarke argues, “Mariam’s repudiation of sexual relations amounts to a nullification of the bonds and obligations of marriage and a dissolution of the union that subordinates female identity to male” (1998: 189). It is in this dissolution of the heteronomous union

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<sup>5</sup> Eloquently, Clarke argues that this form of sexual control makes Herod a subject to Mariam, which destabilizes his sovereignty. This, as Clarke notes, can be observed in the many contradictions of his speech in IV.VII, when he cannot decide how to have Mariam executed (1998: 190).

of man and woman in marriage that Mariam's rebellion mirrors Salome's rejection of female subordination within the proper order of things. Politically, Mariam's disobedience seeks to restore legitimate authority, but her undermining of patriarchal authority has a broader reach, because, like Salome's arrogation of male prerogative, it has the effect of disordering the naturalized world order that legitimizes patriarchal structures. By reclaiming sexual power over her husband, Mariam is breaking custom and seizing a man's right, thus contributing to, in Constabarus's words, "let[ting]the world be topsy-turned" (2012: I.VI. 50).

### *5. Conclusions*

Wray argues that "while the play tempts us to regard Mariam and Salome as ideologically at odds (...) it simultaneously steers us towards recognizing an experiential common ground: neither is content with the status quo and neither plays a traditional wifely role" (2012: 38). Yet, as argued, the connection between their actions and refusals, between their vociferousness and silence—the contradictory shapes of their performance—goes beyond the unconventionality of their roles as wives. It goes beyond the debasement of Salome's lustfulness and dishonesty as a foil to Mariam's chastity and integrity. Even more so, while Mariam's virtuous rebellion for the sake of order and legitimacy could be said to be validated by her "transfiguration" (Beilin 2014: 171) into a Christ-like figure that transcends the limits of earthly authority, she must pay for her transgression with the effacement of her life, body and words in the last act of the play. It seems hardly an uncontested triumph if the woman ends up murdered, especially when drawing attention to the complementary nature of Mariam and Salome's forms of sexual and political disobedience. In the end, Salome does not get divorced, but she lies, cheats and conspires to get Constabarus killed and remains unpunished, free to marry her new lover and satisfy both her sexual and political desires in a way that, in effect, as Wray explains, "confounds normative generic and moral expectations" (2012: 52).

That would be the main conclusion of this study: how the transgressive identities of Mariam and Salome—as identities that can transform, change and go beyond the limits imposed upon them by convention and authority—confound the boundaries of gender, morality

and hierarchy. Mariam and Salome's public actions and speeches perform two shapes of female selfhood in-flux, which eventually disrupt the established parameters of gender normativity. This gender normativity and its associated relationships of power and domination, in charge of sustaining social and political hierarchies through a fixed categorization of identities and gender roles, becomes abnormal as the unstable identities of women as wives and subjects are disrupted, effectively undermining the social and political structures represented in the play—arguably, the social and political structures that articulate the institutions of absolutist monarchy, empire and the patriarchal family. Salome's adultery and ambition presents sexual desire and political determination as viable options for female subjects; Mariam's refusal first to be quiet, later to speak, and finally to comply and obey both sexually and politically offers the possibility of female disobedience shaped within a performance of integrity. In both cases, a transformative and transgressive presentation of the self becomes the vehicle for social change. As Bennett writes, the circumstances, actions and speeches of Mariam and Salome "demonstrate the distinctly performative nature of gender roles in early modern England. In making such a vivid distinction between Mariam's or Salome's inner convictions or desires and their outer conduct, Cary reveals the ways in which women could fabricate public characters and adapt those personae to their environments" (Bennett 2000: 306). It is precisely the changing, performative nature of female public personae that makes them subversive. Herod accuses Mariam of being "a painted devil" and "white enchantress" where "hell itself lies hid / Beneath [her] heavenly show" (Cary 2012: IV.IV 17-18, 45-46); and Constabarus tells Silleus that Salome "is a painted sepulchre / That is both fair and vilely foul at once" (2012: II.IV 41-42). It is therefore female transgressive performance, the refusal to comply and commit to one single category, to act their gender and place, which presents in the dramatic context of Cary's play two metamorphic female identities that manage to crack the foundations of patriarchal order. Mariam and Salome, and their duplicitous and disobedient identities, reveal how early modern women could subvert masculine law and order, as their performance, public speech and self-representation undermine the delicate power structures that sustain and legitimize the patriarchy and its political institutions, thus offering an alternative for social and political transformation.

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