

Hunter Daniels

Professor Smith

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Biblical Legalism and Cultural Misogyny in *The Tragedy of Mariam*

Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* reveals many troubling aspects of the dynamics between men and women during the era of the English Renaissance. The play explores different examples of patriarchal infringement on women's rights through political, cultural, and religious precedents, especially those regarding what was considered appropriate behavior for women. Further, Cary crafts an intricate commentary that analyzes not only how masculinity (within a patriarchy) contributes to social instability but also how patriarchal power structures are often self-defeating in their desire to systemically enforce traditional gender norms. Throughout the play, male characters like Constabarus and Herod act as representatives of the ineffectual patriarchy, displaying a lack of knowledge about the very biblical ideals they claim to hold dear and how those ideals contribute to their wives' supposed lack of virtue. Conversely, female characters such as Mariam and Salome illustrate Cary's argument that the more a patriarchy tries to restrain women, the more determined and impatient women grow to exist as equals in society. In *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Cary shows how misogyny can take root in a culture in the name of religion and, further, how women in such a society must forfeit either their morality or their emotional contentment if they wish to be independent.

Just as the Mosaic law of Judaism functions as the backbone of the Judean culture in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Christianity had an indelible influence on the English common law that Cary was subject to. Cary draws on these similarities to illustrate the misogyny in both cultures,

especially as it relates to marriage statutes (Alfar 62). Though women were allowed to initiate divorce under English common law, it was highly controversial to do so, because women that divorced were assumed to be either unchaste or disobedient toward their husbands, both undesirable traits for a wife during the Renaissance (Britland xvi). Under Mosaic law, if a woman was ever divorced, she was not allowed to remarry and was essentially forced into lifelong poverty, whereas the husband retained his wealth and property and could remarry if he wished (Alfar 64). Similarly, under English common law, marriage deprived women of their financial agency and independence, giving all the rights to their personal wealth and property to their husbands—rights that were not returned upon divorce (62). The result of this unfortunate dynamic was that many women were effectively held hostage in their marriages, unable to leave unless they were willing to risk being poor and isolated for the rest of their lives.

Similar examples of gender inequality are seen throughout Cary's play and are critiqued as products of long-standing, misogynistic social precedent. Cary uses Mariam's and Salome's perspectives on the relationship between religion and marriage in Judea to commentate on the state of gender relations in Renaissance England. Salome wants nothing more than to leave her husband, Constabarus, so that she can be with the man she really loves, Silleus. However, Salome knows that this would require either arranging for Constabarus's death, something out of her reach due to the presumed death of her brother, King Herod, or initiating divorce herself, something not in keeping with Mosaic precedent (Cary 1.4.39–44). Salome questions this example of inequality in act 1, scene 4, where she asks why the Law of Moses bars women from leaving a marriage even though "women [can] hate as well as men" (1.4.48). She recognizes that her society's strict interpretation of Mosaic law will make her either a social pariah or a religious outcast, whereas a divorce would have no effect on Constabarus. Mariam concurs with Salome's

musings on marriage in act 4, scene 8, where she says that only the husband can say what constitutes adultery and, as such, can have sex with, divorce, or marry whomever he pleases under Mosaic law (4.8.63–66). Cary uses Mariam's and Salome's testimonies on marriage and divorce to demonstrate how a patriarchal society can manipulate religious sentiment in order to oppress women and reinforce cultural double standards.

Furthermore, Cary's use of exegetical fallacies within the play illustrates how the misinterpretation of biblical concepts allows the patriarchy to maintain power. For example, Constabarus frequently utilizes "questionable interpretive and rhetorical tactics" when he speaks about women's role in society in the context of his theology (L. Bennett 21). Constabarus's depiction as a legalistic oaf is consistent with Cary's own criticism of works like Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, which espoused that the right to divorce was "a masculine privilege" according to the Bible, specifically Deuteronomy 24:1 (Britland xvi). Constabarus's antipathy toward Salome's desire for a divorce reveals itself to be a manifestation of masculine insecurity disguised as piety. This theory is supported in Constabarus's use of biblical allusions to describe how Salome's pursuit of divorce offends God. Constabarus says that Salome's actions invalidate the work of Moses and render vain God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egypt (Cary 1.6.71–76). Constabarus goes further in his objection by saying that Salome threatens to "reverse all order" in the natural world (1.6.84), causing fish to graze and beasts to swim while winter becomes warm and summer cold (1.6.51–53). While Constabarus claims to criticize Salome out of his devotion to Mosaic law, his earlier language reveals that he is threatened by her ambition because of how it violates the patriarchal order of society. He views the inauguration of this new precedent as a means for women to dethrone the patriarchy, perhaps even resulting in a future where it is women who wear armor and fight in battles while men sit

emasculated in the safety of their homes (1.6.46–48). This evaluation of Salome’s desire to make her own choices as an affront to nature is purely polemical, as it “unreasonably project[s] all of the world’s evils onto . . . women” (L. Bennett 17).

The mixture of legalistic biblicism and patriarchal social structures further coalesces in both of the misogynistic cultures of Renaissance England and biblical Judea. This blend of religion and sexism is seen in the sociocultural methods of evaluating women’s virtue and worth through their ability to be “chaste, silent, and obedient,” the essential, intrinsically linked traits of a wife during Cary’s time (Green 460). Often it was thought that if a woman lacked one of these traits, she lacked all of them. For instance, if a woman spoke contrarily to her husband, not only was she not silent, she was contradicting her spouse, and thus disobedient, while presumably “echoing” the words of another man, proving herself unchaste (460). This tripartite phrase, “chaste, silent, and obedient,” illustrates a desire for wives that always listened, to quote the chorus of act 2, in a “prejudicate” manner, that always deferred to the wisdom of their husbands (Cary 2.4.117). The ideal woman in both Cary’s England and Mariam’s Judea always trusted their husband to tell them the truth and had no desire to publicly speak their own mind, especially not in a way that would contradict, invalidate, or embarrass their husband. Additionally, Cary’s own beliefs regarding the virtues of a woman’s “being” and “seeming” also factor into the play. Cary believed that consistency between a woman’s “being” and “seeming” demonstrated that she was inherently truthful because she “upholds continuity between inner thoughts and outward show” (Britland xx). Though Cary viewed the uniformity in a woman’s being and seeming as a mark of her honor, in the play uniformity is used as a tool to ensure not only that continuity exists between a woman’s inner self and outer self but also that both sides of the woman match her husband.

These cultural standards for feminine virtuosity are a major source of conflict in Salome and Constabarus's marriage. Constabarus claims that by Salome pursuing a divorce, she is proving herself the opposite of a virtuous wife by presenting herself as disobedient and unchaste (Cary 1.6.17–20). Further, the fact that Salome's speech contains ideas contradictory to Constabarus's own shows that Salome's capacity for obedient submission to her husband has been diminished, making her a threat to Constabarus's masculinity. This conflation between Salome's rebellious speech and her reduced value as a wife presents itself again in Constabarus's assertions that her speech is unbecoming of "[her] place" as his wife and that she "deem[s]" herself unchaste by engaging in speech contrary to his (1.6.36, 1.6.20). Here, Constabarus draws the connection between silence and chastity, implying that where one of these is lacking, usually the other is as well. This indicates just how essential a woman's submissiveness to her husband was to Judean culture's patriarchal standard of marriage. If a woman had a sense of self beyond her husband, it was assumed she would soon become a slave to her impulses and be unchaste, outspoken, or disobedient. Moreover, the connection Constabarus draws between how a woman should be "deemed" (1.6.20) and how she is in reality demonstrates how consistency between a woman's being and seeming is a telltale sign of virtue in the eyes of the patriarchy. Essentially, a woman who only *seems* to subscribe to Judean cultural mores, or who does not submit outright, is probably not virtuous or valuable.

While Constabarus only chides Salome for not staying in "[her] place," far worse consequences befall Mariam for displeasing her husband, Herod, who functions as the *de jure* head of the Judean patriarchy and, like Constabarus, acts as an embodiment of the cultural animosity toward unrestrained femininity (Alfar 62). In the past, Herod acted without care for Mariam, such as when he killed her brother and grandfather, and seldom considered how those

events might have adversely affected their relationship (Cary 1.1.37–46). Herod's lackadaisical attitude regarding the consequences of his actions illustrates the discrepancy between a husband's and wife's obligations to one another in Judean culture. Herod is eventually made to care about his wife's feelings in act 4, when he, who was presumed dead, returns to Mariam only to find her in mourning (4.3.5–8). Mariam's sadness at first alarms Herod, and he assumes that perhaps she is playing some cruel joke on him, but she assures him that she is presenting herself to feel exactly as she seems (4.3.52–59). Eventually, Herod's concern turns to anger as he commands that she be put to death for refusing to smile or cease her grieving at his return, something that he struggles with (4.4.55). Herod knows how she seems but cannot be sure of her actual feelings, though ultimately Salome convinces him that she has brought this fate on herself through her loose speech "alluring auditors to sin" (4.7.75), which Herod concurs with, saying, "She's unchaste. / Her mouth will open to every stranger's ear" (4.7.77–78). Once again, the link between chastity, speech, and disobedience appears, as does the connection between feminine virtuosity, being, and seeming. Herod draws the same conclusions that Constabarus does, immediately relating Salome's report of her speaking her mind to other men as a sign of unchasteness and further contending that his inability to discern her true emotional state is a sign that she is being dishonest with him. Herod's reaction serves as a representation of masculine rage and insecurity regarding female objections to male behavior.

Despite Renaissance England's and biblical Judea's religious foundations, gender-based oppression persisted in both cultures, a result of rampant patriarchal hypocrisy. Female individuality was punished in both societies, and the only means for female expression was through the "echoing" of the words of husbands and fathers (Green 460). Salome's constant dissatisfaction with marriage and Mariam's rejoicing at Herod's death says far less about their

own faults than it does about their society's desire to appease the patriarchy and risk perpetuating oppression. This often meant that women were forced to make certain concessions if they wished to realize their own individuality, something that was all but forbidden in Judean society. The Judean culture depicted in the play necessitates that if a woman wishes to live beyond the mold of the chaste, silent, and obedient women, she must concede some amount of happiness or surrender to moral corruption.

Salome's character is perhaps the most morally flawed of the female characters, but she is also possibly the most sympathetic. Her need for marriage and companionship is constantly hindered by her need to express herself, and, as such, she finds herself locked into marriages for lack of any other way to receive affection in a socially acceptable manner. Salome realizes that she is faced with the possibility of lifelong misery: she is forced to either stifle her true self and be a good wife in the eyes of society or choose to free herself from her marriages by her own means. In the case of her first husband, Josephus, this meant carrying out an objectively immoral act by arranging his execution through her brother, King Herod (Cary 1.4.23–27). However, in the case of Constabarus, this meant engaging in cultural immorality by attempting to initiate their divorce. Salome makes the decision in both cases to bend an aspect of her morality in order to preserve her own contentment and independence, viewing moral corruption as a preferable alternative to being a prisoner to cultural precedent. Salome's behavior is the "product, not the antithesis," of the oppressive patriarchal system that victimizes her and illustrates how mimicking the cruelty inflicted upon oneself is one of the most effective ways of surviving as a woman in a patriarchal society (Raber 336).

Unlike Salome, Mariam accepts that she will never be happy as long as she is married to Herod, so in many ways the choice between unhappiness and immorality has already been made

for her. She briefly attempts to mimic the emotions that she feels like she *should* have, such as when she feigns sadness at Herod's death (Cary 1.1.63–66). However, she soon realizes (as her mother, Alexandra, points out) that to falsely lament someone so cruel that she did not love to begin with is irrational and a mockery of Mariam's virtue (1.2.73–74). Mariam realizes that Herod, even if he was her husband, was not worth an insincere outward performance that forsakes her inner contentment. Mariam's virtue is more unshakable than Salome's, so she knows that abandoning the continuity between her inner self and outer self would be dishonorable to herself, and for this reason, throughout the rest of the play, her outward appearance matches her inner disposition. While the link between her being and seeming is broken through her ingenuine sorrow, her legitimate mourning at Herod's return is perhaps the truest example of her virtue. Mariam will not abandon her independence, so she knows that when she goes to reunite with her husband, she will be faced with the decision to be miserable or dishonorable, and rather than choose to break the continuity between her being and seeming again, she greets Herod mournfully (A. Bennett 301–02). When Herod questions the sincerity of her somber appearance, Mariam remains resolute and maintains that her emotions are authentic, saying that "I suit my garment to my mind" and "I . . . never taught / My face a look dissenting from my thought" (Cary 4.3.5, 58–59). Mariam makes a choice as an independent woman to no longer allow her marriage to corrupt her virtue with performances for the sake of others. Rather, she prefers to earnestly grieve, even at the cost of her life. In refusing to abandon her sincerity, Mariam makes herself a martyr for all the women of Herod's Judea and Cary's England who did not have the same luxury.

The martyrdom of Mariam is the singular standout moment of the play and serves as an effective endnote to highlight the severity of the consequences of living as a woman in such an



oppressive and constraining culture. Whereas Constabarus and Herod both act as mouthpieces of the patriarchy who wish to defend and uphold the cultural and religious precedents of their home, Mariam and Salome act as foils that demonstrate the fragility and ineffectuality of tyranny.

Though tyrants such as Herod do oppress those that they rule over, they often fail to understand how their need for total control and obedience is the very thing that separates them from the loyalty of their subjects they so desire. Mariam and Salome, to different extents and using different methods, show the power that the oppressed can wield in their depiction of female defiance that deprives the patriarchy of two blindly loyal, silent, chaste, and obedient drones.

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