

5-2016

Treacherous Selves: Subjection and Subjectivity in The Tragedy of Mariam

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TREACHEROUS SELVES: SUBJECTION AND SUBJECTIVITY IN
THE TRAGEDY OF MARIAM

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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May 2016

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the topic of subjectivity and subjection as expressed through language in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*. By tracing the grammatical choices made by two of the play's primary female characters, Mariam and Salome, the paper argues that these women shape and express their ideas of themselves as speaking subjects through their use of language; the subjective selves they create in the process are continually in tension with their identities as wives, whose identities, by the standards of early modern chastity, ought to be absorbed and obliterated by their husbands' identities. The supposed death and subsequent return of the play's primary authority figure, King Herod (Mariam's husband and Salome's brother), catalyzes the fracturing of these women's identities as they grapple with the impossibility of chastity within an atmosphere of tyrannical paranoia. Ultimately, these women find themselves eclipsed, betrayed by these treacherous selves.

DEDICATION

To my much beloved niece and nephew, Chloe Ann and Levi Walton. You both came into my life during my time in graduate school, one of the hardest and best pursuits I've ever undertaken. I pray you find a path in life that makes you feel this alive. You have both brought me so much joy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks, of course, to my committee. To Dr. William Stockton: thank you for your continual support, enthusiasm, and (exceptionally prompt) feedback. It has been such fun learning from you. To Dr. Megan Eatman: thank you for always being a generous and responsive listener, and for helping me see connections in my own work that I hadn't noticed. To Dr. Elizabeth Rivlin: thank you for your excellent feedback; your careful, methodical comments always made me stop and think more deeply.

I'm also immensely grateful to the other professors who have taught me during my time here at Clemson. You have all challenged me, encouraged me, and shown me how to continue to shape my own identity as a scholar and a teacher. Particular thanks to Dr. Lemons for your incisive feedback on an early draft of the thesis. Thanks also to Dr. Thomas for your kindness and mentorship. It has meant so much to me.

I also thank my friends at Mi Casa de Vida (past and present). Your support has been more important than you could know. Thanks for never doubting for a moment that I could do this, and for speaking peace and truth into my life every step of the way. Thanks to my MAE cohort for your companionship and encouragement. You're all doing a great job with your lives. And so many thanks to the incomparable Chloe Whitaker. If I listed the reasons this thesis wouldn't exist without you, it would run several pages long.

My family deserves all the thanks I'm able to give. Mama and Daddy, thanks for your unswerving support and continual prayers. For the sake of brevity, I'll thank all you Boyters for loving me so well, for believing in me so hard, and for keeping me laughing.

And thanks to Ginger. You know why.

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Treacherous Selves: Subjection and Subjectivity in *The Tragedy of Mariam*

I. Introduction

The tragedy in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* largely emerges from a complex network of betrayals and deceit. In the final scene in which Mariam appears before her death, she attempts to account for her situation but does not place the blame where the reader might expect. A number of characters either have or claim to have a hand in her death: Salome plots to "work her end" (III.ii.54); the butler, although laying primary blame with Salome, considers himself the "hateful instrument" that she used to betray the queen (IV.v.11); Doris attributes Mariam's downfall to "Doris' curse" (IV.viii.77); and Herod calls himself "the villain that hath done the deed, / the cruel deed, though by another's hand" (V.i.187-188). Mariam ignores all these explanations and says:

Had not myself against myself conspired,
No plot, no adversary from without,
Could Herod's love from Mariam have retired,
or from his heart have thrust my semblance out. (IV.viii.9-12)

In a play that contains its fair share of calculated interpersonal betrayals, Mariam redirects the focus to a different kind of betrayal: the betrayal of the self. Mariam's wording clearly indicates divided selves at war with one another.

Mariam is not the only one who speaks this way. The language used by numerous other characters in the play calls attention to the idea of multiple selves. After Mariam's

death, Herod includes himself in the list of people he blames, saying, “Herod’s wretched self hath Herod crossed” (V.i.132). When Salome bemoans her state as Constabarus’ wife, she says, “But now, ill-fated Salome, thy tongue / to Constabarus by itself is tied” (I.iv.17-18). Later on, she says, “I curse my tongue, the hinderer of his doom” (I.iv.60). Sohemus, after sharing the news of Herod’s imminent return, says something that foreshadows Mariam’s own statement about her conspiracy against herself: “I fear ere long I shall fair Mariam see / in woeful state and by herself undone” (III.iii.30). All of these instances set up a paradigm in which the issue is not only multiple selves, but the dangers that these hidden selves pose to each character because of the diverging agendas they represent.

While a number of characters suffer these divided selves, Mariam and Salome seem uniquely threatened and challenged by them. Each woman’s choices in language reflect her journey as she grapples with this divided self.¹ Both women consistently go back and forth between speaking in the first person and referring to themselves in the third person, as though talking about a completely different person. I suggest that Mariam’s speech reveals the tension between her understanding of herself as a subject of her husband, Herod, on the one hand, and her understanding of herself as an independent subject, separate from Herod, on the other. Her use of language shifts to mirror her decisions about which self she foregrounds at different points.

¹ As Raber points out, Cary uses the play to examine “both the successes and failures of women’s speech, whether to husbands, brothers, or kings” (Gender 325).

Salome's situation is equally complex: she finds herself in a paradoxical chain of relationships wherein the onetime illicit lover is now the legitimate but oppressive husband. Salome desires revenge on Mariam and the freedom to marry Silleus, and she seems to believe she can achieve both ends. Ultimately, both women face the impossibility of either adhering to or circumventing early modern ideas of chastity; or, more specifically, the impossibility of navigating the treacherous atmosphere that emerges from Herod's tyranny and his obsession with those standards of chastity. Mariam herself makes an explicit connection between her husband's policing of her behavior and the beginning of her need to redefine her subjectivity. In her opening speech, she claims that "he, by barring me from liberty / To shun my ranging, taught me first to range" (I.i.26).²

These men enforce a set of societal norms regarding chastity which are most clearly expressed by the Chorus in *Mariam*. The speech that concludes the third act is particularly significant. It falls at a turning point in the plot: in the first three acts Mariam and Salome contend with Herod's absence, and in the last two acts they contend with his presence. In this pause between two worlds of chaos, the Chorus presents what Raber calls "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" (328). This incoherence is apparent in the Chorus' obsessive concern (a concern prevalent in early modern literature) with the

² Karen Raber argues that Mariam here demonstrates that "expectations fostered by men, deployed socially to construct domestic, specifically marital relationships, do not reflect, but produce inconstancy" (326).

tension between the reality of women's separateness as individuals and the ideal of a wife's complete submission to her husband. The Chorus insists:

'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 restrained to be. (III.iii.97-101)

These lines get at the inherent difficulty of this definition of chastity and submission: the statement that women must give themselves entirely to their husbands suggests that women "own" themselves in the first place and are able either to give or to withhold these selves from their husbands. The Chorus posits a "proper self" that should restrain wives and regulate their behavior (III.iii.101). Raber notes the ambiguity inherent in the term "proper self," synonymous with "chaste self," while simultaneously framing the self in terms of possession and property (329). The Chorus continues in the same vein:

"When to their husbands they themselves to bind, / Do they not wholly give themselves away? / Or give they but their body, not their mind...?" (III.iii.114-116).³ In the end, the Chorus fails to find "any position, speaking or silent, private or public, that would be acceptable in a wife" (Raber 326). The nature of this code of chastity, founded on the impossible notion of total possession, leaves these women no ground to stand on.

³ The wording here almost inevitably calls to mind Othello's insistent, paranoid words: "O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites!" (III.iii.268-270).

Cristina Leon Alfar offers an interesting expansion on the typical discussion of masculine anxieties in the play, describing masculine anxieties as “productive of and reciprocal with feminine anxieties” (64). While masculine anxieties anticipate and respond to perceived dangers, the anxieties that women experience are a response to the actual dangers and difficulties imposed on them by the domestic, legal, and political limitations they face (65). Both masculine and feminine anxieties are a “gendered response to a chaotic and unpredictable system of authority that depends on chaste female bodies for an imaginary stability” (65). The women in the play respond to the unstable atmosphere that results from Herod’s tyranny by struggling with fractured selves whose warring desires betray them. Mariam and Salome both exhibit what Raber calls “the self-splitting that [attends] resistance” (328) in their vacillations between first and third person speech. By tracing important moments in the play for each woman and noting her grammatical choices, this paper will outline the way Cary’s primary female characters struggle to reconcile their diverging reactions to the figure whose tyranny both causes the divergence and punishes it.

It is important to address some issues of terminology since there are some inherent ambiguities in some of the terms I consider important to this discussion. In this play, Mariam and Salome’s fractured selves are crafted and expressed via grammatical choices, and have varying relationships to Herod and the code of chastity that he enforces. For the sake of simplicity, I will call the first and third person by their grammatical names. I will argue that both Mariam and Salome contend with at least two selves. To name one of these selves, I’d like to borrow (and slightly modify) Pheroras’

phrase, when he says that Herod's death has "made my subject self my own again" (II.i.8). The phrase "subject self" is potentially ambiguous; however, Pheroras is referring to the self that is subjected to Herod. Therefore, I will use the phrase "subjected self" to refer to the self that is regulated by its subjection to Herod. In Herod's absence, though, both women also experience freedom from the self-canceling rhetoric of chastity. They begin to experiment with grammatical choices that reflect the development of what I would like to call "subjective selves," selves that are not completely given over to their husbands/rulers. Mariam and Salome create these subjective selves for radically different reasons, and they respond just as differently to Herod's return. However, they both experience the eclipsing of their subjective selves by Herod.

II. Mariam

The reason for Mariam's death has been explained in several ways, with critics like Ilona Bell and Elisa Oh attributing Mariam's death to Herod's misreading of her strategic silences. Elisa Oh discusses the ambiguity regarding the significance of silence from female subjects, explaining: "For early modern audiences intentional female silence could be a sign of honest seeming or dishonest seeming; a chaste, obedient subject or an unchaste, resistant subject" (185). This patriarchal system paradoxically requires women to be completely yielding and completely "readable."⁴ More specifically, Oh claims that

⁴ Graphina is often seen as a foil to Mariam, a character that conforms to the early modern ideal of the chaste, "readable" woman by means of "a mode of 'safe' speech, private speech" which conforms to her lover's wishes (Ferguson 184). Ilona Bell offers a different explanation: "[L]ike the young Cary, Graphina has begun a serious course of study to acquire the knowledge she needs to express herself as she would like in speech and also, presumably, in writing, because Graphina's name puns on the Greek word graphesis for writing as a silent form of speech. Hence Graphina is less a foil for Mariam than a surrogate for Cary" (23).

Mariam “enact[s] silences that construct a subject position apart from [her] political subjecthood” (185). I agree that Mariam’s silences are significant, but the choices she makes in her speech are far more telling. Oh comes to the conclusion that “Excessive belief in the honest-seeming subject or in the dishonest-seeming subject produces the tragedies’ central misunderstandings” (204). In other words, she attributes Mariam’s death to Herod’s inability to “read” Mariam’s silences accurately, an inability born from his obsession with “the potential discrepancy between women’s inner and outer selves” (198). While I agree with this assessment of male anxieties, I am more interested in considering Mariam’s agency in the play. Thinking about feminine anxieties, as Alfar suggests, allows for an approach to Mariam’s actions that sees her as fully aware of the dangers she faces.⁵ This approach acknowledges the agency involved in the choices she makes regarding her self-expression.

To trace this pattern, I explore four significant moments in Mariam’s development: the first act, in which she processes the news of Herod’s death; her reaction when Sohemus tells her that Herod is alive; her first conversation with Herod after his return; and her soliloquy shortly before her execution. Mariam chooses to build a position that preserves her integrity as a subjective self in full knowledge of the fact that, within the system she inhabits, this choice will elicit Herod’s anger and most likely result in her death.

⁵ Ferguson links these anxieties (especially the anxieties about public speech in the beginning of the play) to Cary’s own questions about the legitimacy of her voice as a female playwright. Such a discussion, although certainly related, is beyond the scope of this paper.

The first stage in Mariam's process of constructing the subjective self occurs during the first act of the play.⁶ This stage is characterized by ambivalence and vacillation, a confusion that parallels her mixed feelings about her husband: "one object yields both grief and joy" (I.i.10).⁷ During this speech, Mariam goes back and forth between referring to herself in the first person and the third person. Her insistence on chastity in self-representation (Oh 185) and her high position as a political subject are still intertwined. She cares a great deal about integrity, insisting: "Not to be empress of aspiring Rome / would Mariam like to Cleopatra live: / With purest body will I press my tomb" (1.2.121-123). At this point, her reference to her tomb seems mostly rhetorical: she would rather die than win favor by Cleopatra's methods.

On the other hand, the political pride associated with her subjected self is still of great value to her. She responds venomously to Salome's claim that Herod could have married "her betters," replying:

My betters far, base woman: 'tis untrue.
You scarce have ever my superiors seen,
For Mariam's servants were as good as you
Before she came to be Judea's queen. (1.3.17-20)

⁶ Ilona Bell notes that the first two acts dramatize "a historical moment when family, government, and society are dominated and controlled by women" (19) while the last three "present a world reeling from Herod's return and the reinstatement of tyrannical male power" (27).

⁷ Ferguson explores this tension: "At the beginning of the play, Mariam is torn between the demands of wifely duty, which coincide at least intermittently with her feelings of love for Herod, and the demands of her conscience, which are initially defined in terms of family loyalty and voiced through the figure of Mariam's mother Alexandra" (183).

Here she uses the third person, which distances her from her political identity while still expressing her pride in that identity. Her royal lineage and position, although she prides herself on them, are what make her an object to Herod.⁸ She closes her argument with Salome by making her first appeal to Heaven for justice; throughout this appeal, she uses the third person consistently, focusing on the strength of her position as a political subject, a strength that is only available to the subjected self.

Mariam's ambivalence about her subject position all but disappears in the second stage, in which she chooses the subjective self over a return to the subjected self. When Sohemus informs her of Herod's imminent return, she responds with dismay, and he replies, "Be not impatient, madam; but be mild-- / His love to you again will soon be bred" (III.iii.13-14). He reminds her of her duty both as Herod's subject and his wife. Mariam replies decisively: "I will not to his love be reconciled; / with solemn vows I have forsworn his bed" (III.iii.15-16). When Sohemus says she must break those vows, she refuses, insisting:

I'll rather break

the heart of Mariam. Cursed is my fate.

But speak no more to me; in vain ye speak

⁸ Mariam's pride in her royal identity in this scene is mirrored by that of her mother Alexandra, who participates in the patriarchal political system in ways that are not immediately obvious. Although Alexandra urges Mariam to cast off her loyalty to Herod, her enmity with Herod stems from the fact that she considers him "a fatal enemy to royal blood" (I.ii.13) and that "he hates Hircanus' family" (I.ii.48). Even in a direct conversation with her daughter, Alexandra refers to Mariam in the third person and seems deeply concerned with her daughter's identity as part of a royal line that claims descent from King David. Alexandra objects not to Mariam's participation in this system, but to the specific king to whom she is subject. At the end of the play, Nuntio relays Alexandra's final interaction with her daughter: she says she is ashamed "to have a part in blood / of her that did the princely Herod wrong" (V.i.43-44). Alexandra no longer voices any concerns about her murdered father and son and seems to care little for the death of her daughter.

To live with him I so profoundly hate. (III.iii.17-20)

The wording of this reply is revealing. First, she does not say she *would* rather break the heart of Mariam, but that she *will* do so; this statement could be understood as a rejection of her subjected self. Second, she acknowledges that her fate is cursed, which indicates her understanding of the potential consequences of her decision. Third, after commanding Sohemus not to speak to her anymore, she drops the third person references for the rest of the scene, speaking authoritatively in first person. Sohemus' reaction anticipates the danger she places herself in: "I fear ere long I shall fair Mariam see / In woeful state and by herself undone" (III.iii.29-30). He later identifies "unbridled speech" as Mariam's greatest fault (III.iii.65). Bell reads this prediction that Mariam "will undo herself by speaking too freely" as a mistake on Sohemus' part, claiming instead that Mariam's silence actually achieves her undoing (29).⁹ As I will demonstrate later, Sohemus' prediction does actually prove true in Mariam's confrontation with Herod.

The speech that follows is central to understanding Mariam's process as she chooses her subjective self over a return to her subjected self. She asks, "And must I to my prison turn again?" (III.iii.33). She explains that the veil of her sympathy has been drawn away to reveal her hatred for Herod. Although the horrifying image of Herod elicits fear, her scorn is stronger. She reflects that she could "enchain him with a smile" and "lead him captive with a gentle word," but rejects this course of action, saying, "I

⁹ Ferguson points out that his concern about Mariam's "unbridled speech" anticipates the Chorus' criticism, which "virtually equates female speech— and the will to utterance— with unbridled sexual behavior" (186).

scorn my look should ever man beguile, / Or other speech than meaning to afford”

(III.iii.45-48). If she were planning to yield to her fear, she would attempt to captivate him with smiles and gentle words, veiling her hatred for him. Her commitment to honest self-expression eclipses her desire for self-preservation.

The next few lines show Mariam’s awareness of the danger inherent in her choice.

She says:

Else Salome in vain might spend her wind,

In vain might Herod’s mother whet her tongue,

In vain had they complotted and combined,

For I could overthrow them all ere long. (III.iii.49-52)

Here Mariam makes it clear that, were it not for her need to represent herself honestly, she could easily overthrow the vain efforts of her husband’s sister and mother. She goes on to say that her innocence is a shelter, not from danger, but from “the pangs of inward grief” (III.iii.54), perhaps the same grief she has been concealing in the past for the death of her brother and grandfather. She insists that this innocence is a relief to her sorrows, but says nothing about it protecting her from political danger. In fact, she explicitly notes that she would not choose impurity of spirit over the chance “To be commandress of the triple earth / And sit in safety from a fall secure” (III.iii.58-59). Thus, when she says, “Mine innocence is hope enough for me” (III.iii.33-62), it would be a mistake to think that she believes her innocence can guarantee safety from her husband. Instead, she is relinquishing actual hope for life and resting on the hope of her innocence, in spite of the consequences.

Herod's return marks the third stage in Mariam's struggle with the two selves. In her confrontation with Herod, she continually addresses the distinction that Oh talks about between internal and external selves. When Herod asks why she is dressed in dark colors, she replies, "My lord, I suit my garments to my mind / And there no cheerful colours can I find" (IV.iii.5-6). Oh explains that Mariam fails to consider "the danger of such open revelation of a subject who refuses contented acceptance of her subjecthood as a wife, a domestic and political subordinate" (200). I argue that Mariam is quite aware of the effect her words will have, just as she was aware of the danger of her decision in her speech to Sohemus. Her choice of the active verb is important: she emphasizes that she chooses to "suit" her external appearance to her internal humor. She purposefully draws Herod's attention away from her appearance (which should, by all rights, be expressing her humility and devotion to him) and highlights her complaint against him.¹⁰

She goes on to outline these complaints specifically, even going so far as to reject his empty offer of material wealth and openly accuse him of acting against her happiness:

Your offers to my heart no ease can grant
Except they could my brother's life restore.
No: had you wished the wretched Mariam glad,
Or had your love to her been truly tied—
Nay, had you not desired to make her sad—

¹⁰ Raber: "The chorus asserts that in marriage women 'give themselves' and give as well thoughts that were once 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" (Gender 328).

My brother nor my grandsire had not died. (IV.iii.23-30)¹¹

Not only does she establish the first person subject position here, she also refers to her previous subjected self in the third person. She then proceeds to shift the responsibility for her unhappiness to her lord. While Oh claims that Mariam's silences convey her dissatisfaction (203), Mariam actually expresses her dissatisfaction quite blatantly.

Herod soon grows impatient with her "froward humour" (IV.iii.53) and gives her a chance to correct what is already a very bold stance for a wife and subject to assume. He asks her to smile, refocusing on her external appearance. Mariam stubbornly draws the conversation back to her internal self, saying, "I cannot frame disguise, nor never taught / my face a look dissembling from my thought" (IV.iii.58-59).¹² Herod answers, "By heaven, you vex me. Build not on my love" (IV.iii.60). He invokes heaven and issues an imperative containing a very clear threat. Mariam unflinchingly replies, "I will not build on so unstable ground" (IV.iii.61). Grammatically speaking, her response is an agreement, a statement that mirrors the content of the imperative. At the same time, she rebuilds the truncated subject position inherently absent in the imperative ("Build not" rather than "You will not build") and turns an agreement into an insult.

¹¹Bell explores the Petrarchan and Elizabethan sonnet forms in Cary's play. She explains the significance of this moment: "When Herod willingly offers Mariam the active and empowering role that [Elizabethan forms] grant their private female lyric audience, his dialogic love poetry recalls and confirms the mutual, dialogic love that Mariam herself recalls and yearns for in the play's opening speech" (28). In light of this insight, it seems as if Mariam's reticence in responding to this dialogic form might emerge from her knowledge that in reality, it is a facade for the patriarchal system she actually inhabits. Just as in the early days, Herod could kill her family and still expect her to be happy with him, she can assume that there is no actual reciprocity in the dialogic form.

¹²In Bell's analysis, Mariam turns herself into "a conventional Petrarchan lady, cold but virtuous" forcing Herod to respond as an "unrequited Petrarchan lover" (28).

Additionally, Mariam's "unstable ground" could have two meanings. The clearest is, of course, Herod's love. However, there is a simultaneous sense in which Mariam also refers to the heaven that Herod invokes. Alfar notes that the rewards that were promised to women for chastity were fictive and that any woman could be accused for almost any reason (79). The heaven that Herod invokes is certainly unstable ground for a woman whose chastity is called into question with very little cause. Thus, in the next scene, in which the Butler carries out Salome's plot, Mariam could be appealing to an entirely different idea of heaven when she says, "it can be no worse than heavens permit" (IV.iv.4). Oh argues that Mariam enacts her rebellion through silence, opening the door for Herod to suspect "that she harbors a hidden, dishonest, and therefore malicious feminine subject position" (202).¹³ However, Herod's actual accusation is that Mariam wants to "add a murder to [her] breach of vow" (IV.iv.26). Mariam decides to make this breach during her speech to Sohemus and lays it out quite explicitly in her answers to Herod. His error is not in misjudging her silence, but in making the leap from explicit rebellion to hidden, murderous motives.¹⁴

The final stage of Mariam's process of constructing her subjective self occurs in the speech she makes before she is executed. Her thoughts here are a bit more difficult to understand in light of the claims this paper has made so far. I have claimed that upon

¹³ Lynn Bennett notes that the requirement for feminine silence in conduct literature almost always included a reference to Eve's original sin (11).

¹⁴ Here Bennett makes reference to the Chorus at the end of Act II, which addresses the flaws of human judgment. Although the Chorus is explicitly condemning those who too quickly believe the news of Herod's death, Bennett insists the critique also "implicitly points to a more general and pernicious consequence of such willful understanding" like Herod's decision here (12).

Herod's return, Mariam chooses to continue speaking as the subjective self in full awareness of the dangers inherent in this choice. This passage seems on the surface to be the moment in which she first becomes aware that her many merits cannot protect her from these dangers. I argue that here, Mariam reflects on her process of choosing the subjective self, circling through the moments I have laid out so far.

First, she returns to the dual perspective she experienced in the beginning of the play. Mariam is clearly thinking about two selves as she wonders:

Am I the Mariam that presumed so much
And deemed my face must needs preserve my breath?
Ay, I it was that thought my beauty such
As it alone could countermand my death. (IV.viii.1-4)

Although the most obvious sense is that she refers to her recent interactions with Herod, the text leaves room for other interpretations. It seems reasonable to believe that this previous Mariam she refers to is the subjected self that she begins to question after her husband's death, in which case the time Mariam reflects on in this speech could be the scene at the beginning of the play where the divergence of the two selves begins to take place.

Next, she echoes the concern voiced by Sohemus:

Had not myself against myself conspired,
No plot, no adversary from without,
Could Herod's love from Mariam have retired,
Or from his heart have thrust my semblance out. (IV.viii.9-12)

Besides reminding the reader of Sohemus' words, it also reflects briefly on her confrontation with Herod. She acknowledges that no one except Mariam herself could have thrust her semblance out of his heart, recalling her repeated denial of her image and emphasis on her internal self during that conversation. She then returns to the subject of Cleopatra, mirroring her conversation with Alexandra in Act I and reflecting on her pride in her chastity and high position.

The next set of lines is, perhaps, more difficult to reconcile with the notion that Mariam fully anticipated the consequences of her defiance. After dwelling on Herod's rejection of Cleopatra, Mariam says:

This made that I improvidently wrought
And on the wager even my life did pawn,
Because I thought, and yet but truly thought,
That Herod's love could not from me be drawn.
But now, though out of time, I plainly see
It could be drawn, though never drawn from me.
Had I but with humility been graced,
As well as fair, I might have proved me wise,
But I did think, because I knew me chaste,
One virtue for a woman might suffice. (IV.viii.29-38)

Mariam states that she wagered her life *because* she believed that Herod's love would survive the test of it. However, if she is vacillating between the subjected and subjective selves, this section is spoken as the subjected self whose safety depends on her

subordination as an object of love for Herod. In other words, Mariam may be retrospectively viewing her actions through the lens of the perspective of the subjected self. As Ferguson notes, these lines suggest that Mariam could have escaped her tragic fate if she had “refrained from speaking her mind to anyone other than her husband. But...it is precisely because Mariam speaks her mind not only to others but also, and above all, to her husband that she loses her life” (187).

Mariam’s choices throughout the play reflect her understanding of the fact that in the world she inhabits, there is no space for a truly chaste, honest feminine subject; the standards of chastity and honesty outlined by the Chorus render the existence of such a subject impossible, and Mariam’s attempt to reckon with these standards is doomed to failure. After experiencing the freedom of self-expression afforded her by Herod’s death, Mariam is unwilling (and perhaps unable) to re-enter the position of a subordinated female subject. Cary affirms this choice through the way she constructs Herod’s response to Mariam’s death. Ferguson notes the difference between Othello and Herod: “this jealous husband created by a female playwright laments not only his innocent wife’s death but, specifically, the loss of her too lately valued powers of speech” (183).¹⁵ If Mariam is taken as an agent responding to anxieties born out of very real threats, it becomes clear that she is aware that death is the only way to maintain the subjective self she has created.¹⁶

¹⁵ Bennett notes that “Despite Herod's clear culpability, he holds Salome's pride responsible for his and Mariam's fall. Seeming to echo orthodox interpretations of the Genesis story that blame Eve for Adam's fall, Herod insists that Salome's influence undermined his free will and thus minimizes his own culpability” (19).

¹⁶ Heller: “Onstage herself, Mariam was unable to convince Herod of her innocence with words, actions, or looks. Murdered, however, she becomes a narrative cut off from her body—the desires of a dead woman

III. Salome

Salome's progression is less linear than Mariam's. For one thing, Salome must deal with her subjection to two people: her husband, Constabarus, and her brother and king, Herod. Additionally, Salome has two distinct desires: her resentment towards Mariam causes her to desire revenge, and her love for Silleus causes her to desire a divorce from her husband. Both the subjective self and the subjected self have complex scenarios to navigate, and ultimately Salome's success is dubious at best.

Salome's confrontation with Mariam in the first act of the play establishes her conflicting use of first and third person, revealing the same prideful insistence on her royal lineage as Mariam exhibits. Salome claims, "more than once your choler have I borne," (I.iii.22) but switches to third person in the next sentence: "Salome's reply is only scorn" (I.iii.24). When Mariam accuses Salome of murdering her own husband, Salome turns the tables and insists she was merely revealing plots between Mariam and Josephus. She then self-righteously insists, "I meant not, I, a traitor to conceal. / Thus Salome your minion Joseph slew" (I.iii.41-44). Although the repetition of the first person pronoun serves a metric purpose, its presence draws attention to the switch between the first person and third person in these lines. Salome capitalizes on the ambiguity of her subjected self's dual allegiances: when Mariam charges her with treachery against her husband, Salome highlights her duty to Herod.

can no longer be suspect. Herod's readiness to believe once Mariam can no longer prove him wrong suggests that questions of a woman's sexual deceit or loyalty can never be proved; she can be chaste without reproach only after her death" (437).

In the following scene, Salome expands on this ambiguity. After expressing her desire for Silleus, Salome says:

But now, ill-fated Salome, thy tongue
To Constabarus by itself is tied,
And now, except I do the Ebrew wrong,
I cannot be the fair Arabian bride. (I.iv.17-20)

This is the first of several moments that Salome acknowledges the role her language has in navigating political subjectivity. In this case, the words that have bound her to Constabarus prevent her from pursuing Silleus without wronging her husband. However, Salome is very aware of the irony of the situation: Constabarus, who used to represent the illicit relationship impeded by the rightful marriage, is now the rightful husband who impedes her illicit affair with Silleus. Where Mariam's situation consists in a fairly simple divide between a self subjected to Herod and a self that exists apart from him, Salome's situation is a hopeless tangle involving a dead husband, a living (hated) husband, a lover, and a king/brother. The subjected self faces a paradoxical web of allegiances that makes it impossible for Salome to avoid dishonoring one or more of them.

In the opening scenes, Salome finds herself unable to use her leverage with Herod to work against either Mariam or Constabarus in her usual ways.¹⁷ Instead she

¹⁷ Alfar argues that "Cary depicts a woman whose first thought is a legal divorce—or at least the appropriation of a legal right to divorce—and who turns to murder only when divorce is not an option" (87). This argument loses some of its traction in light of the fact that Salome is responsible for her previous husband's death, not to mention the following scene, where Salome describes her plan of divorce as the most "imperfect means" there could be to secure what she desires.

“appropriates existing laws for her own purposes to seek equity outside the law” (Alfar 64). Throughout her declaration of this intent, Salome speaks in first person, declaring, “I’ll be the custom-breaker and begin / To show my sex the way to freedom’s door” (I.iv.49-50). When Silleus asks if she has made any progress towards securing their future, she replies:

I have devised the best I can devise:

A more imperfect means was never found.

But what cares Salome? It doth suffice

If our endeavours with their end be crowned. (I.v.5-8)

This statement detracts a bit from the victorious tone of her divorce speech; Salome is forced to this appropriation of power by her lack of leverage. Alfar notes that “The cultural custom and law in place both restrict and enable Salome’s act, so that she simultaneously resists and reproduces structures of power in place prior to her desire for liberty” (66).

After this statement to Silleus, Salome drops the third person references throughout both her conversation with him and the subsequent argument with Constabarus. Her husband’s scorn and disgust at the idea of her divorcing him elicit this response from Salome: “Though I be first that to this course do bend, / I shall not be the last, full well I know” (I.vi.61-62). She goes on later to say, “I mean not to be led by precedent: / My will shall be to me instead of law” (I.vi.79-80). Her tone resembles that of her earlier speech, holding no trace of her dissatisfaction with her plan.

Herod's return catalyzes Salome's return to the third person self-reference for the first time since the opening act of the play. Although the news that Herod is alive is heavy to Pheroras, Salome says, "Now Salome of happiness may boast" (III.ii.21). She knows that she has a chance to arrange for Constabarus' death, making way for Silleus. She makes use of Pheroras' changed estate (his "subject self" being, once again, not his own) for her own purposes: she knows that if she accuses Constabarus herself, the accusation "would lesser credit find" (III.ii.50). Additionally, Salome knows that now she has a chance to execute her revenge against Mariam. She says, "Now, tongue of mine, with scandal load her name" (III.ii.65). With the return of Herod, Salome is able to pursue her two desires in the way she originally intended. In this way, Salome simultaneously rebels against her subjection in one way while re-entering it in another way. She acknowledges this fact when she sends a message to Silleus that her brother's return "Will give [her] foot no room to walk at large" (III.ii.85). Alfar points out that "when [Salome] decides what she wants, she imitates Herod, the play's primary agent and authority figure. The only way for a woman to overcome her anxieties, therefore, is to act, and to act—in this play—is to act ruthlessly" (67).

Salome's final scene, in which she convinces Herod to execute Mariam, is a complicated one in terms of self-definition and agency. Where in the previous acts of the play Salome has spoken openly and at length, here she almost exclusively makes one or two line replies to Herod's much longer statements. She never refers to herself in the third person, but she also rarely uses the first person, primarily restricting her statements to Mariam. In comparison with her defiant behavior towards Constabarus, Salome relies

entirely on suggestion when speaking to her brother, seeming mostly to agree with him. Herod asks her if she has been amazed at Mariam's speech, and Salome replies "No, not a whit" (IV.vii.70). When he insists that Mariam "hath a world-amazing wit" (IV.vii.72), she yields, agreeing that Mariam "speaks a beauteous language" (IV.vii.73) but that her tongue "Doth but allure the auditors to sin / And is the instrument to do you wrong" (IV.vii.75-76). Herod calls her an ape in comparison to Mariam's beauty, and Salome endures the insult silently.

Even though this is the scene where Salome takes action to carry out her own desires, her speech is far more regulated than at any other point in the play. It is almost as though she is simply an extension of Herod, the embodiment of his anxieties about Mariam. She carries the command for Mariam's death. Later, after Mariam's execution, Herod's own words deepen this erasure of Salome as an independent agent. He says:

Accursed Salome, had'st thou been still,
My Mariam had been breathing by my side.
Oh, never had I, had I had my will,
Sent forth command that Mariam should have died. (V.i.157-160)

Although initially cursing Salome, Herod claims the command that she sent forth as his own, as though Salome becomes the command itself, sent forth both in accordance with and against Herod's will.¹⁸ Later he reiterates the sentiment:

I am the villain that have done the deed,

¹⁸ Additionally, Herod's wording here does not bode well for Salome's future in general, much less her future with Silleus.

The cruel deed, though by another's hand.

My word, though not my sword, made Mariam bleed;

Hircanus' grandchild died at my command. (V.i.187-190)

Herod acknowledges the executioner whose hand did the deed but ignores Salome entirely.

In the first act of the play, Salome grapples with the complexity of her allegiances, as well as her dual desires and her inability to pursue them as she wishes. Even though divorce is not her first choice, she makes the best of it and appropriates the Mosaic laws regarding divorce in order to achieve what she wants. During this stage, she speaks in the first person. Finally, when Herod returns, Salome rejoices at the chance to manipulate her brother to get what she wants. However, she loses her authoritative first person voice and ends up being absorbed as Herod's voice.

VI. Coda

Elizabeth Cary's play sets up a system in which nearly every character must contend, either directly or indirectly, with the ever-shifting political climate that revolves around the tyrant Herod and his anxieties.¹⁹ Herod's absence activates a power vacuum that affects each of the female characters in the play differently,²⁰ and his return forces each woman to renegotiate her relationship with him. Mariam reacts by constructing the subjective self out of a desire for integrity of self-representation. Unwilling to relinquish

¹⁹ Perry points out: "It is little wonder that Salome is a liar, Mariam's mother a hypocrite, and Sohemus a bearer of tales. Herod's abuses have a ripple effect that makes such behavior almost impossible to avoid" (120).

²⁰ Heller: "Herod's absence allows or even creates both Mariam's unbridled speech and her conflicted feelings" (433).

this position, Mariam refuses to yield to Herod's desire and is imprisoned and executed. Salome sees the news of her brother's death as an impediment to her ability to get what she wants. She responds by appropriating the right to divorce. As soon as Herod returns, she abandons this course of action and returns to her original plan. However, in the process of enacting her revenge on Mariam, Salome essentially disappears, becoming little more than an extension of Herod's will. Herod's immediate grief and regret over Mariam's death does not bode well for Salome's future, even though she has achieved both of her desires: Mariam's demise and her husband Constabarus' death.²¹

In many ways, Mariam and Salome's speech mirror Herod's: Herod refers to himself in the third person by name seventeen times, only two times fewer than Mariam does. Even before her death, he uses language that demonstrates a divided self. After the butler makes his accusation against Mariam, Herod commands the royal guard to "do as much for Mariam" (IV.iv.74) as they have done for Sohemus. Only a couple of lines later, though, he questions where the guards are taking her. The soldier replies, "You bade / We should conduct her to her death, my lord" (IV.iv.81-82). Herod answers, "Why, sure I did not. Herod was not mad" (IV.iv.83). He retracts the command of death, deciding instead that Mariam will be imprisoned indefinitely. After her death, he echoes his own wording, saying, "I was her lord. / Were I not mad, her lord I still should be" (V.i.68-69). He goes on to "curse [himself] as cruel" (V.i.121) and claim that "Herod's wretched self hath Herod crossed" (V.i.132). In a gesture that oddly resembles

²¹ Alfar points out that "Salome survives unpunished, thus calling into question her position as vice figure" (83). However, the play gives little indication of any positive future for her.

submission, Herod concludes the final speech of the play by expressing his own identity in relation to Mariam in the words he envisions on his tombstone: “Here Herod lies, that hath his Mariam slain” (V.i.258).

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