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How does Elizabeth Cary treat love in *The Tragedy of Mariam*?

In her article, 'Space, Violence, and Bodies', Jennifer Heller avers that Renaissance drama 'interrogates the metaphorical inner spaces that contain an individual's private motives, desires, and intentions.'¹ Elizabeth Cary's neo-Senecan closet drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613), is no exception to this trope.² Set within the stifling confines of the Judaeian court, and never intended for public consumption, the play pivots around the romantic relationships of its central couples: Mariam and Herod, Graphina and Pheroras, Salome and Silleus. Through these relationships, Cary presents love – defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a feeling or disposition of deep affection or fondness for someone' – as a deeply complex, multi-faceted emotion.³ The union of Graphina and Pheroras represents an ideal of sweet and untarnished devotion; the desires of Salome, Silleus and Herod demonstrate humankind's propensity for fleeting lust; and the disputes of Mariam and Herod reveal the slippage between love and hatred. In this essay, I will navigate each strand of Cary's portrayal of love, exploring the romantic attachments of the play both in isolation and as a network of foils.

Looking first at love in its idealized form, Pheroras and Graphina's relationship emerges as a pinnacle of emotional and even spiritual union. Building upon the divine motifs present in Petrarchan love poetry, as well as Late Medieval linkage between true love and religiosity, Cary saturates their speech with holy imagery. In Act 2, Scene 1, for example, Pheroras' speech is permeated by divine adjectives, such as 'hallowed', 'long-desired', 'lifted', 'blessed' and 'wished' – an effect picked up by Graphina's responses, e.g. 'winged', 'silent', 'highest', 'wondrous', 'grace' and 'pure' (2.1.1-86). Notably, the motion of both their speeches is upwards ('lifted', 'winged', 'highest', 'high'). Cary's imagery has them soar, metaphorically, towards a sort of divine ecstasy, far estranged from the prison-like experience bemoaned in Mariam's prior monologue. A concurrent motif of held hands counterbalances this lightness,

¹ Heller, J. L., 'Space, Violence and Bodies in Middleton and Cary', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 45:2 (Spring 2005): 426.

² Cary, Elizabeth. *The Tragedy of Mariam*. Edited by Ramona Wray. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.

³ 'love, n.'. OED Online. December 2022. Oxford University Press
<https://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=love&_searchBtn=Search> [accessed February 13, 2023].

connoting support and stability. Cary uses shared rhymes in their dialogue, like Pheroras' 'nigh' and 'tie' and Graphina's 'I' and 'nigh' (2.1.1-4,25-28), to reinforce this sense of mutual support. Whilst Pheroras always makes the rhyme first and Graphina second, in accordance with the Patriarchal order of early modern England, later in the play, Pheroras demonstrates an avid interest in Graphina's intellectual abilities. In his conversation with Salome, for example, the simple sentence 'Her wit exceeds her beauty' (3.1.24) works alongside a motif of eyes and ears to emphasize the depth of his affection for Graphina – the statement's significance amplified by the contrast between its simplicity and the somewhat convoluted couplets and quatrains which precede it (3.1.10-30). In his widely disseminated *Advice to a Daughter*, John Heydon claims that 'it is the Crown of blessings when in one woman a man finds both a Wife and a friend.'⁴ As such, Cary's creation of Pheroras and Graphina's union as one of mutual attraction and respect allows it to emerge as 'the Crown' of the text's relationships – a zenith from which the other relationships are tested, their flaws illuminated.

Cary contrasts this pure, idealized love with the lustful infatuations of Salome, Silleus and Herod. In his courtesy book, *The Courtier*, Renaissance didact Baldassarre Catiglioni presents beauty as 'a sacred thing, and love, which strived after it, a movement toward the divine'.⁵ And yet, in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, attraction-based lust is experienced by the antagonists of the play and, as such, cast in a negative light. Salome is perhaps the major proponent of lust within the play, her adulterous sensuality enhancing the moral opposition between her and Mariam.⁶ Whilst Mariam's actions and emotions are characterized by sincerity, Salome is perpetually 'unsteady' and superficial (2.4.31). In Act 2, Scene 4, Constabarus' jealousy-ridden speech serves to underscore her instability, his serpentine imagery and repeated dichotomy of 'outside graces' and 'rotten bones' reinforcing the fickle and even poisonous nature of Salome's passions (2.4.15-66). Brazen sexual imagery in Salome's own speech, such

⁴ Heydon, John. *Advice to a Daughter: In Opposition to Advice to a Sonne* (London, 1685) in Raber K. L., 'Gender and the Political Subject in The Tragedy of Mariam', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 35:2 (Spring 1995): 324.

⁵ Catiglioni, Baldassarre. *The Book of the Courtier*. Translated by Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (n.p., 1901), 290, in Goldstein, N. L., 'Love's Labour's Lost and the Renaissance Vision of Love', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 25:2 (Summer 1974): 338.

⁶ Steig, A., 'Cary's Strongest Feminist Messages in The Tragedy of Mariam', *Real World* (2007): 46.

as ‘affection in my bosom crept’ (1.5.35), suggests a complete surrender to desire – fickle as it may be. Silleus reciprocates this simplistic, carnal passion. His language is loaded with references to his ‘fair Salome’, with his alliterative reduction of her to ‘precious prey’ exaggerating his deeply sexual evaluation of her worth (1.5.1-50). Salome may be ‘beauty’s queen’, according to Silleus (1.5.23), but frequent, deeply racialized comparison of her and Mariam’s skin tones aligns her darker ‘cheek’ with a muddied, unchaste nature (2.3.9). Herod’s passion for Mariam is, though less explicitly sexual, similarly oriented around attraction. From his first quatrain, in Act 4, Herod casts Mariam into an aestheticized vision of angelhood, with his scriptural command ‘let thy presence make the day more bright’ reflecting his gushing idealization of her good looks (4.1.11). The repetition of the noun ‘eye’ within his speech encourages comparison with Pheroras’ monologue (in which eyes *and* ears are a central motif) and, thereby, highlights Herod’s flagrant lack of interest in anything other than ‘Her sight’ (4.1.8-42). It also seems significant that his feelings for his wife are consistently dubbed a ‘passion’, by himself and other characters (1.2.74, 2.3.10, 4.1.42). In seventeenth-century England, the noun ‘passion’ was most prevalent in medical literature, used in relation to painful disorders, fits and seizures.⁷ The consistent application of the term to Herod’s feelings thus seems firmly symbolic of their fleeting, albeit powerful, nature.

Cary casts Mariam and Herod’s relationship as a convergence between love and hatred, with the pair spasmodically shifting from one state of obsession to the other. She opens the play with a tearful monologue by Mariam (1.1.1-78). Here, imagery of uncontrollable natural disasters (‘rivers fall’, ‘true drops did rain’ and ‘floods of tears’) foregrounds not only the inexorable inevitability of her tragedy but the sheer extent of Mariam’s distress. Though the noun ‘love’ is repeated eight times in Mariam’s seventy-eight-line monologue, her speech is dominated by juxtaposed semantic fields of hatred (‘foe’, ‘destroy’, ‘rage’, ‘scorn’, ‘fury’, ‘jealousy’) and love (‘joy’, ‘affection’, ‘chaste’, ‘heart’, ‘loveliest’, ‘beauty’). Prison imagery underscores the claustrophobia of her marriage, with the anaphora of ‘Oft I have wished’ indicating a lively mental current that her constrained relationship cannot satisfy (1.1.16-18). Mariam is angry and confused in the opening scene. And yet, Sohemus’ Act 3

⁷ ‘passion, n.’. OED Online. December 2022. Oxford University Press.
 <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138504?rskey=xkkUex&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed February 13, 2023].

announcement that Herod is, in fact, alive sees her slip towards decisive loathing of her husband. Mariam's initial response to the news is fragmented, breaking into the monosyllabic clauses 'How!', 'Lives?' and 'What' (3.3.6) – a striking shift from her typically free-flowing speech. She then pronounces a hyperbolic triad of things she would rather hear ('the ruin of my family', 'our city burned', 'I shall a disgraceful death die'), before descending into a series of exclamative and rhetorical questions (3.3.6-62). Mariam's verdict is clearly asserted: 'I will not to his love be reconciled!' (3.3.15) With Thomas Elyot's *Defence of Good Women* claiming that women's 'most unperfection is their inconstancye', Mariam's emotional yo-yo-ing between love and hatred could easily have been attributed to female hysteria if it wasn't for the fact that Herod, the play's patriarch, experiences similar emotional volatility.⁸ Entering at the start of Act 4, Herod makes profuse and often fantastic outpourings of his love for Mariam, with successive superlatives serving to underscore her position as the apple of his eye (4.1.1-42). Cary reverses this passion into a confused hatred from Act 4, Scene 4 onwards. Herod's speech becomes filled with dichotomies. Mariam's reduced to a 'fair fiend', 'foul pith contained in the fairest rind' (4.4.55,31). Her eye 'is pure as heaven' but her mind is 'impure' (4.4.32-33). Herod 'loves' her and 'profoundly hates' her. Such mental instability undermines traditional associations of masculinity with rationality, thus upholding the slippage between love and hate as an ungendered and all-pervasive phenomenon (4.4.42-43).

To conclude, love emerges as an ephemeral, knotty emotion within *The Tragedy of Mariam*. By placing three, distinct relationships at the crux of the play, Cary presents its varied nature – interlaying the deep affection of Graphina and Pheroras, the sensual passions of Herod, Silleus and Salome, and the confused love-hate seesawing of Mariam and Herod. As the tragedy spirals towards its catastrophic end, the audience is, therefore, confronted with not only the excitement of romantic attachment but love's dangerous potential.

⁸ Elyot, Thomas. *Defence of Good Women* (1409) in Raber, 'Gender and the Political Subject in The Tragedy of Mariam', 326.

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