

'Public language grac'd': Rhetorical Dilemma and Gender Politics in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*

Thongrob Ruenbanthoeng¹

Abstract

Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* explores the ambivalence of women's speech and also displays many contradictory views of female utterance in the Renaissance. On the one hand, the play seems to express a 'radical attack on the Renaissance concept of wife as the property of her husband' by allowing its protagonist, Mariam, to freely express her thoughts and yet, on the other, it also seems to accept the conservative doctrine of female obedience to masculine ideology through the voice of the chorus, which argues that a woman 'usurps upon another's right/ That seeks to be by public language graced' (III.i.239-40)². Moreover, it is intriguing that whereas the outspoken but virtuous Mariam creates suspicion by her open speech and must die, the villainess, who has sexual and discursive freedom, survives and is not punished for her demonic eloquence. In this paper, I will explore the rhetorical dilemma of female speech and ask if there is a place for women in the conflicts between rhetoric and silence in *The Tragedy of Mariam*. I will also propose that throughout the play, the meanings of women's speech and silence are always subject to interpretation by men; therefore, by using men as their discursive medium and mouth-piece, women are able to assert their rhetorical agency without posing any threat to patriarchal authority.

บทคัดย่อ

บทละครเรื่อง *The Tragedy of Mariam* แสดงให้เห็นความสับสนในภาษาของผู้หญิงรวมทั้งความขัดแย้งเรื่องมุมมองเกี่ยวกับการใช้ภาษาของผู้หญิงในสมัยฟื้นฟูศิลปวิทยา แม้ว่าบทละครดูเหมือนจะโจมตีในทัศนคติที่ว่าผู้หญิงเป็นสมบัติของผู้ชายโดยกำหนดให้มาเรียนในฐานะตัวละครเอกพูดแสดงความรู้สึกนึกคิดได้อย่างเสรี แต่ในขณะเดียวกัน บทละครกลับยอมรับกรอบอนุรักษนิยมเรื่องการเชื่อฟังคำสั่ง

¹ Thongrob Ruenbanthoeng Instructor Department of Literature Faculty of Humanities Kasetsart University

² Margaret Ferguson (1991: 235-250) subtly notices the contradictory views of the Renaissance female rhetoric in this play

ของผู้ชายผ่านทางคำพูดของคอรัสซึ่งคัดค้านการที่ผู้หญิง “ยึดสิทธิของผู้ชายด้วยการใช้ภาษาในพื้นที่สาธารณะ” ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น มาเรียมหึงสาวผู้เปี่ยมคุณความดีกลับต้องสิ้นชีวิตเพราะคำพูดของตนเอง ทว่าตัวโกงผู้ใช้คำพูดให้ร้ายผู้อื่นและหมกมุ่นเรื่องเพศกลับไม่ถูกลงโทษจากการใช้ภาษาในการกระทำชั่ว บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษาทางต้นของการใช้ภาษาของผู้หญิงผ่านบทละครเรื่อง *The Tragedy of Mariam* โดยเสนอว่าไม่ว่าผู้หญิงจะใช้ภาษาประเภทใด ความหมายของภาษาจะถูกตีความโดยผู้ชาย ดังนั้นผู้หญิงจึงต้องใช้ผู้ชายเป็นกระบอกเสียงในการแสดงความคิดเห็นของพวกเขาเพื่อที่จะไม่ล่องล้าเข้าไปในขอบเขตอำนาจการใช้ภาษาของผู้ชาย

Introduction

The lives and thoughts of women in the early modern period have recently been focused and academically researched. The literary works written by female writers have been re-examined in order to fully understand the women's status in the Jacobean period. One such work is Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* which was probably written between 1602-1604.³ It is believed to be the first original play in English written by a woman. The play is also thought to be one of Senecan closet dramas. It illustrates the way a well-educated, strong-willed female, conscious of the cultural constraints on women of the time, achieved acceptable self-expression in the early modern period.

The play is based on the story of Herod and Mariam as recounted in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*. It is a story of an upper-class woman who comes to value her integrity more than the obligations of married women to be subservient to their husbands. Mariam, a protagonist in the play, marries her husband Herod, King of Palestine who is also her enemy because he kills her grandfather and her brother. When Mariam hears the news about Herod's death in Rome, she openly agonizes over her conflicting feelings about him. However, Herod's death is only a rumour. When Herod comes back, his wicked sister, Salome, wrongfully tells him that Mariam committed adultery when he was away. Asked to defend her chastity, Mariam surprisingly keeps silent. As the play proceeds, it becomes to a great extent an ideological debate on the rights of a married woman, specifically her right to speak. While outspokenness is equated with sexual impurity, silence seems to be the only way women can employ to avoid suspicion of unchastity. However, by keeping silent, she loses her life because Herod interprets her silence as a confession of her guilt. Is there a place for female rhetoric?

³ All the reference to *The Tragedy of Mariam* will be to *The Tragedy of Mariam, The Fair Queen of Jewry with The Lady Falkland: Her Life*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1994.

Chastity, Silence and Obedience

In her book, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender and Property*, a book that draws a connection between issues of power, gender and property raised in rhetorical and literary works from the early modern period, Patricia Parker discusses the significance of rhetoric and gender hierarchy as follows:

Actual definitions of figures, scheme and tropes, moreover--in contexts which appear to be governed by simple motivation of the example or by the desire to explicate rhetorical matter to an audience in need of instruction--frequently begin instead to turn into illustration of the social order the figure would rhetorically reflect.
(Parker, 1988: 99)

The negative examples that use women as their basis not only illustrate and elaborate on rhetorical ideas but they also reveal the ideas of the larger culture. As both product and producer of the culture and consequently the social order, the texts and literature of the period participate in a discourse that seeks to uphold the natural order, the natural hierarchy as believed in Early Modern England. Rhetorical examples also seek to show what may happen to social bodies if rebellious women are allowed to undermine natural hierarchy. Women were often defined by their speech acts and female sexuality was tied to their expression. Therefore excessive talkativeness indicated a woman who could not or would not submit to patriarchal authority and who tried to change the social order.⁴

According to books of conduct from the period, a woman should not risk her honour, that is, her sexual reputation, by asserting her voice, for a woman speech is considered to be the mark of lewd conduct and sexual incontinence.⁵ What Mariam struggles with throughout the play is the dilemma of speaking in public. In the first two acts of the play, she is eloquent. 'Now stir the tongue that is so quickly move'd,' Salome in the

⁴ Jonathan Gil Harris (1998: 108) states that 'tongues whose unrestrained physicality of utterance possesses an innate transformative power, a capacity to intervene in and change the existing order of things'.

⁵ Hilda Smith (1996: 10-28) exploring the Renaissance concept of woman states that in the seventeenth century, even though authors of books on conduct and advice literature concerning women adopt a puritanical tone and avoid a misogynistic one in their works, two popular books aimed at the education of women, William Gouge's *description Of Domestical Duties* (1622) and Richard Brathwaite's *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), still advocated restricted, domestic lives for women including how to avoid risking their honour by not asserting their voice.

first act accuses Mariam who has indeed just spoken in 'choler' (I.i 227-8). It is all the more surprising, then, that the eloquent Mariam, who knows how to defend herself and attack her accuser, should later turn to silence when accused of adultery. Verbally attacked by Salome, her sister-in-law, in Act I that Mariam's betters would have rejoiced at the prospect of being Herod's wife, she rebukes Salome with vigour:

*You scarce have ever my superior seen:
For Mariam's servants were as good as you,
Before she came to be Judea's queen (I.iii.224-6).*

Furthermore, she argues that she is not dependent on Herod for her position:

*Though I thy brother's face had never seen,
My birth thy baser birth so far excell'd
I had to both of you the princess been (I.iii.232-234).*

Mariam claims moral as well as social superiority over her sister-in-law, linking the latter's transgressions with those of her ancestor and attributing them to her inferior heritage. While Salome is regarded as thoroughly bad, by exposing Mariam's haughtiness, this is the one place in the play where Cary may be said to create a measure of sympathy for her. Mariam certainly violates those tenets of Renaissance culture which exhort women to be silent.

However, her outspokenness with Salome in this pivotal scene is extremely damaging to Mariam because it provides the impetus for Salome's plot to undo Mariam later in the play. Her outspokenness is most apparent in the confrontation between the two women. Marta Straznicky (1994: 126) is right in claiming that 'in stoic terms Mariam's self-righteous verbal rebukes demonstrate that her passions are not fully self-contained.' Mariam's outspokenness is not only condemned by Salome and by the chorus but also by Sohemus, who laments after she has disclosed her hatred of Herod to him: 'Unbridled speech is Mariam's worst disgrace/ And will endanger her without desert' (III.iii.183-4). For other characters, Mariam's speech is frequently associated with sexual transgression. Salome reminds her brother that 'her tongue/ Doth but allure the auditors to sin/ And is instrument to do you wrong' (IV.iii. 430-2), and Herod agrees, 'It may be so: nay, tis so: she's unchaste,/ Her mouth

will ope to ev'ry stranger's ear' (IV.iii.433-4). In early modern culture, husbands were expected to control their wives' speech; this gives Salome license to warn Mariam: "You durst not thus have given your tongue the rein, / If noble Herod still remain'd in life" (I.iii.219-20). Mariam uses her rhetorical skills when she receives the news of Herod's death, however, after learning that his death is just a rumour and Herod is alive, Mariam vows to contain her tongue. She scorns the use of a form of language or gesture through which she could persuade Herod not to have her killed by concealing her hatred:

*I know I could enchain him with a smile:
And lead him captive with a gentle word,
I scorn my look should ever man beguile,
Or other speech than meaning to afford* (III.iii.163-6).

Even though she realizes that her smile and her words have the power to reduce Herod's anger, she refuses to use them as a means to win his favour. Instead she pursues her true desire which is to act upon her sense of what she knows, believes and wishes: that is to be unconstrained by her obligation to Herod, whether as wife or subject. This kind of behaviour is in stark contrast with the culture of the period and considered as both sexually and socially unacceptable. At the end of Act III, it can be seen that the verses of the chorus articulate the doctrine of wifely self-containment: "Tis not so glorious for her to be free, / As by her proper self restrain'd to be" (III,iii.219-20). The chorus also suggests that revealing her inner feelings in the form of speech impairs her chastity as much as adulterous action would: 'Her mind if not peculiar is not chaste' (III. iii.242).

Private vs Public

The chorus takes the conventionally conservative position of Renaissance culture denying married women the right of independent thought. However, if we pay very close attention to the words of the chorus there is a paradox when they say that wives should talk to only their husbands and not to anyone else. However, the execution of Mariam explicitly derives from the fact that she talks to her husband and not to someone else^o:

^o As Margaret Ferguson (1991: 242) notes, the play's subsequent development makes this notion absurd since 'it is precisely because Mariam speaks her mind not only to the others but also, and above all, to her husband that she loses her life.'

*That wife her hand against her fame doth rear,
 That more than to her lord alone will give
 A private word to any second ear,
 And though she may with reputation live,
 Yet though most chaste, she doth her glory blot,
 And wounds her honour, though she kills it not.

 When to their husbands they themselves do bind,
 Do they not wholly give themselves away?
 Or give they but their body, not their mind?
 Reserving that, though best, for others' prey?
 No sure, the thought no more can be their own
 And therefore should to none but one be known (III.iii.227-38).*

The chorus also concludes that a wife should give both body and mind to her husband. The verses acknowledge her power but recommend strict self-restraint in the cause of honour: 'But 'tis thanke-worthy, if she will not take, All lawful liberties for honour sake' (III.iii.225-226). The 'lawful liberties' that the chorus is most concerned with is the liberty of speech. For the line quoted above insists that a wife's honour and glory is wounded 'though most chaste' if she speaks 'a private word to any 'second ear' beyond that of her husband. Mariam is condemned for behaviour unbecoming to a woman, having ignored the injunction on all women to be silent and to appear, and not just be, chaste.

The last stanza elides the distinction between private and public speech, transforming her 'private word to any second ear' into the condemnation of a woman's public speech:

*Then she usurpes upon another right,
 That seeks to be by publike language grac't,
 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 finde,
 A common body, then a common mind (III.iii.239-244).*

The chorus does not claim Mariam's views are corrupt but that they are inappropriate because they are made public. It is clear that for the chorus the only truly

'private' speech for a wife is speech confined to her husband's ears alone. The chorus also virtually equates female speech with unbridled sexual behaviour. As the play proceeds, it becomes, to a great extent, an ideological debate on the rights of a married woman, specifically, her right to speak. Karen Raber also argues that the chorus' powerful articulation of the extremes of Renaissance thought on women's place and behaviour is contradictory and erratic. The chorus exhorts Mariam to behave as a 'good wife' should, but 'in its delineation of proper behaviour, the chorus is unable to locate any position, speaking or silent, private or public, that would be acceptable in a wife.' (Raber, 1995: 326) Ironically, Salome, who successfully manipulates her husband and brother and other male characters, is also an outspoken character; however, unlike her sister-in-law, she is not the target of the chorus. The chorus never blames Salome for outspokenness. She too has spoken to a 'second ear', that of Silleus, and indeed far more extensively than did Mariam to Sohemus. At the end of Act I, juxtaposed against three scenes that describe Salome's infidelity and desire, the chorus seem to be judging her action but in the last stanza, the chorus surprisingly announces that it is judging Mariam:

*Still Mariam wisht she from her Lord were free,
 For expectation of varietle:
 Yet now she sees her wishes prosperous be,
 She grieves, because her Lord so soon did die.
 Who can those vast imaginations feed,
 Where in a propertie, contempt doth breed (I.vi.518-523).*

The double standard of the chorus' judgment leads to the question of its authority in the play. Moreover, the word 'public' is also very problematic since it is difficult to determine in what sense precisely the thing in question is originally called 'public'. The word itself seems to have diverse meanings when it is interpreted by different characters in the play. Does Mariam really talk to the public? The Oxford English Dictionary (1997) gives the meaning of the word 'public' as 'to open to general observation, sight or cognizance; existing done or made in public' and also mentions that the phrase 'in public' means 'in a place or situation, condition or state open to public view.' It is true that Mariam's conversation with Sohemus about her sexual life is considered inappropriate but obviously she does not express her thought 'in public.' Cary is likely to school her audience to scrutinize the chorus' habit of judgment and to cast doubt on its self-assured verdict. The claims of the

chorus become antecedents rather than a final adjudication. On these grounds, it can be said that the accusation she has suffered is unfair since the interpretation of the word 'public' is absolutely different for men and women. Mariam's punishment, therefore, does not come from her public speech but from the different interpretation of the word 'public' by her male counterparts.

While the argument on whether or not Mariam's speech is made public, it is obvious that Salome's verbal transgression has taken place in the context of privacy. The danger of her speech she poses against the patriarchal authority in Act 1 scene 4, questioning the privilege of divorce given to men is not threatening as it should be. She does not reveal her plan and express her inner thought to anyone. What allows Salome to get away with such transgression and from condemnation of the chorus is that she speaks her mind in the private sphere. The public/private binary opposition plays the vital role in controlling the fate of the female characters in the play. If the voice of the male chorus is a representation of patriarchal doctrines that women have to conform to, Salome is very successful in exploiting the patriarchal system to her advantage by making attempts to conform to patriarchal ideals of feminine behaviour. It is true that Salome never received chastisement from the chorus. When it is her actions that they seem to be describing, it is always Mariam who receives judgement, not Salome. For example, there is a double standard at work when Mariam attempts to 'divorce' herself from Herod in Act III. She says, 'I will not to his love be reconcile, With solemn vows I have foresworn his bed' (III..iii.133-134). Although Mariam's statement may remind us of Salome's earlier vow to be rid of Constabarus: 'But now I must divorce him from my bed' (I.iv.317), the success of each woman in her attempts greatly differs. Both of them are talking about refusing having sexual relations with their husbands but one in private but the other to a 'second ear.' Salome obviously understands the true meaning of the words 'public' and 'private.' She follows the chorus' instruction by recognizing that the words 'private' and 'public', when interpreted by men. The words have different meanings from what she understands. The failure or success of female speech in this play seems to depend not only on women's understanding of the patriarchal system but also on the ability to interpret the meaning of men's utterance.⁷

⁷ Salome correctly interprets the meaning of the word 'public' according to the definition of the chorus. The conversation between Salome and her lover, Silleus, does not show any threatening sign of rebellion against the patriarchal authority. And her conversation with Constabarus takes place in domestic realm, not in the public.

Masculine Mouthpiece

Since women's speech is always subject to the interpretation by men, one strategy that women can employ in order to avoid being incorrectly interpreted and to create credibility in their words is by using men as their mouthpiece. Laura Gowing thoroughly investigates the way in which words used by men and women are differently measured in early modern England. Gowing concludes that 'when credit was measured, men's speeches were valued higher than women's'⁸ In her soliloquy after successfully manipulating her brother, Pheroras, to act as her mouthpiece to get rid of her husband, Salome clearly states that

*This will be Constabarus' quick dispatch,
Which from my mouth would lesser credit find;
Yet shall he not decease without a match,
For Mariam shall not linger behind (III.ii.81-84).*

Moreover, even though she reveals in soliloquy that she has a plan to eliminate Mariam by using her tongue 'with scandal load her name, Turn hers to fountains, Herod's eyes to flame. (III.ii.98-99), she 'keep(s) mute' and uses the butler as her mouthpiece in accusing Mariam of the crime of petty treason.

In contrast, while Salome successfully exercises rhetorical strategies to achieve her goals, Mariam turns to silence. After being accused of committing adultery, we never again hear Mariam's voice. It is surprising that Mariam maintains her silence until she is executed in Act V, an event that is not performed on stage but narrated by Nuntio. Her silence here is ambiguous since it can be interpreted either as a form of resistance or alternatively as a sign of submission.⁹ Like the word 'public' in the play, silence is also subject to interpretation by men. While silence means obedience to the chorus and guilt to Herod, it also means 'a sign of discontent' (II.ii.42) to Pheroras. It is possible that Mariam had an insight that she should

⁸ Gowing (1996: 111-138) notes that in the early modern England, personal credit was a central issue for courts. Good credit was described differently from men to women. For men, the crucial point was 'able to live of himself' While women were expected to be financially dependent, other pointers to their credit were available such as sexual morality and neighbourly behaviour. Sexuality, for women, remains a vulnerable point both in 'the construction and destruction of reputation' which is inseparable from the credibility of their words.

⁹ Silence, as observed by Christina Luckyj, (2002: introduction) becomes increasingly viewed as a tool of political resistance. It is regarded not just a sign of submission but also a marker of subjectivity.

not speak her mind to anyone, not even to her husband and that she should conform to what the chorus had repeatedly suggested to her throughout the play. She seemed to realize that nothing could save her life from Herod's tyranny and that silence would be the only appropriate form of rhetoric she could use at this moment in order to redeem her chastity.

However, in Act V, it is evident that Mariam employs silence as a form of resistance. According to Nuntio, when she is led off to be executed, she 'made no answer yet smiled, a dutiful, though scornful smile' (V.i.50-51). In Act IV when Herod had urged Mariam to smile: 'Yet smile, my dearest Mariam, do but smile, And I will all unkind conceits exile' (IV.ii.142-143), she refused to do so, saying that she 'cannot frame disguise' (IV.ii.144). Now she gives Herod what he wanted but not at his command. Her smile at the last moment of her life implies her resistance to Herod's tyranny. Her silence and smile also mirror what happened to Ann Askew, the famous Protestant martyr, who worked to revise and circumscribe the Pauline dictum. Her examiners found her refusal to speak more disturbing than her speech, even as they construct her transgression as a speech act: 'They asked, it of me whereunto I made them no answer but smiled' (Luckyj, 2002: 124) Mariam's silence makes her 'stately' (V.i.27) and powerful: her silent scorn clearly expresses the fact that she is neither touched nor overcome by Herod's cruel power and suggests a hidden resistance to his authority.

Why, on she went,

And after she some silent prayer had said

She did as if to die she were content,

And thus Heave'n her heave'nly soul is fled (V.i.83-6).

Though falsely accused, Mariam approaches death with peaceful resignation. Mary Ellen Lamb states that in Renaissance literature the willingness to die was represented primarily as a means of exonerating women from the charge of sexual guilt. One of Mariam's last sentences is addressed to Nuntio: 'Tell thou my lord thou saw'st me loose my breath' (V.i.73). Interestingly, in many ways, Herod's reaction to Mariam's death parallels Mariam's own reaction at the opening of the play when she believes that Herod is dead. Just as Herod required Mariam's death in order to value her, Mariam required Herod's death in order to recall her love for him, but the way that Mariam reacts to Herod's death is the inverse of his reaction to hers. She says:

*Then why grieve Mariam, Herod's death to hear?
Why joy I not? The tongue no more shall speak
That yielded forth my brother's latest doom. (I.I.39-41)*

Believing him dead, Mariam rejoices that Herod no more will speak. Herod's reaction to Mariam's death is quite the opposite. It is ironic that after Mariam's voice is finally silenced by death, Herod yearns to hear it:

*Oh say what said she more? Each word she said
Shall be the food whereon my heart is fed. (V.I.70-1)*

Here, it is clear that, for Mariam, silence is the only suitable solution since it not only frees her from tyrannical control but also redeems her chastity. In the case of Mariam this implies that female speech is no longer controlled or appropriated by patriarchal authority. Her silent scorn clearly expresses that fact that she is neither affected nor overcome by Herod's cruel power. As Betty Travistky (1990) has pointed out, the issue of female chastity is often linked to stories of petty treason. This is because more often than not the petty treason is motivated by a desire to end an unhappy marriage or legitimize an illicit affair. Chastity, of course, is linked to silence and obedience. Her death apotheosizes her as a victim whose suffering and sacrifice affects the tyrant and open the way for change.

The narration of Nuntio is very appropriate for the ending. Throughout the play, Mariam has been struggling with the rhetorical dilemma of her speech and silence. By replacing Mariam's voice with Nuntio's narration, Cary successfully undermines the danger of woman speech which is always considered as a threat to patriarchal authority. Moreover, through the voice of a male discursive medium, Mariam's language does not need to be re-interpreted or re-evaluated. The meaning of her speech can be fully conveyed without any risk of misinterpretation.

Conclusion

Throughout the play, the conflict between the ideology of the chorus and Mariam is there to perplex the audience. Several critics have tried to identify who represents Elizabeth Cary's voice in the play, the chorus or Mariam. However, do we have to assume that one voice alone represents Elizabeth Cary's position? Is it possible that she is thinking aloud? It seems that Cary creates the dialogues between Mariam and the chorus to explore

diverse perspectives on the same subject. By putting the chorus' comments on Mariam's behaviour at the end of each act, Cary gives her audience a clearer view of the two extreme perspectives. However, I conclude that in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, eloquence and the rhetoric of silence seem almost to give no benefit to women since neither can save Mariam's life. She was accused of petty treason and committing adultery because of her tongue and subsequently executed because of her silence. It seems that there is no place for Renaissance women in the realm of rhetoric. This is not because they do not know how to employ rhetoric successfully or ignore its power and danger but because the meanings of their rhetoric need to be interpreted and finally approved by their male counterparts before being recognized. Through the conflicting and contradictory positions that render no single voice authoritative and demand to be assessed, Cary's struggle to find a place for the speaking subject who happens to be a woman and a wife should have become clear, but there seems to be no such place for woman in English Renaissance rhetorical culture. If there is a place for women in rhetoric, it is in the hands of male authority since the meanings of female rhetoric are always subject to interpretation by men.

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