

Performing *The Tragedy of Mariam* and Constructing Stage History

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Early Theatre 17.2 (2014), 149–166DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12745/et.18.2.2542>

Since the rediscovery of Elizabeth Cary's drama, The Tragedy of Mariam, the play and its author have generated a veritable critical industry. Yet little has been written about performance, a lacuna explained by a reluctance to think about Mariam as a theatrical creation. This article challenges the current consensus by arguing for the play's theatrical imprint and by analysing two 2013 performances — a site-specific production at Cary's birthplace, and a production by the Lazarus Theatre Company. Throughout, Mariam engages with casting, costume, lighting, set, and movement, issues that have mostly been bypassed in Cary studies.

Elizabeth Cary's drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, is no longer a neglected text. Since its rediscovery some thirty years ago, the play and its author have generated a veritable critical industry; the term 'Cary studies' now describes a deep and wide-ranging body of scholarship.¹ Yet virtually nothing has been written about performance, a lacuna explained by the general reluctance to think about *Mariam* as a theatrical creation. Instead, feminist critics follow convention in assuming that, as a 'closet drama', *Mariam* would never have been performed. The consensus of opinion is that *Mariam* was written to be read aloud by Cary's domestic circle (rather than staged as part of an aristocratic entertainment); some critics see the play as not only unperformed but also unperformable.²

This assessment has had a far-reaching effect on the ways in which, beyond feminist and women's writing circles, critics at large have taken up the play. As the first original drama authored by a woman, we might expect *Mariam* to occupy an important position in theatre history. Yet the play in this regard has received little attention. Inside a discipline which defines itself in terms of the Shakespearean and the non-Shakespearean (with 'masque studies' occupying sub-sections of these two groupings), a play designated 'closet drama', no matter how historically significant, fails to fit into the 'early modern drama' canon. Jeremy Lopez's 2014 study, *Constructing the Canon of Early Modern Drama*, illustrates this point, given that Cary's play is conspicuous by its absence. In a study whose brief is the 'broad expansion

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of the range of early modern dramatic texts available for scholarship, pedagogy, and appreciation', Cary, and the wealth of critical writing on her play, is completely invisible.³ De facto, of course, this invisibility means that we regard early modern drama as constituting a wholly male-authored preserve. This state of affairs has as much to do with a lack of a traditional performance history for *Mariam* as with related critical factors. The identification of *Mariam* as a 'closet drama' excludes the author from generic discussion: for Lopez, and for others working in the discipline of theatre history, Cary is not 'Shakespeare's contemporary'.

But, in fact, recent studies have begun to highlight the extent to which Cary achieved recognition in her own time as a well-networked translator, poet, and dramatist. In addition to Richard Bellings's 1624 preface to the countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*, in which he thanks Cary, his '*patronesse*', for her '*many favours*', the printer of the 1633 edition of the dramatic works of Marston dedicated the book to her (William Sheares's note, which specifies how '*your Honour is well acquainted with the Muses*', confirms Cary's attachment to metropolitan theatrical culture).⁴ That *Mariam* shares an interface with the drama of its time further suggests the play's sensitivity to other dramatic influences. These include Marlowe's major plays, as well as *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.⁵ Moreover, Cary's appropriative practice and use of Old Testament history powerfully link her to other playwrights, such as Massinger, whose *The Duke of Milan* similarly relies on Thomas Lodge's translation of Josephus's Herod and Mariam narrative. Similar continental instances, such as plays by Hans Sachs and Alexandre Hardy, also spring to mind, the point being that scholars have now established that Cary was working within established traditions of adaptation and reinvention. Equally significant is the way in which Cary's drama was itself a contemporary point of reference. Certainly, the play was known to Thomas Middleton and imitated, pointing to a blurring of 'private' and 'public' distinctions.⁶ *Mariam*'s double existence as a ca 1603 to ca 1606 manuscript and a 1613 printed book supports such blurring. As Marta Straznicky observes, a 'play that is not intended for commercial performance can nevertheless cross between private playreading and the public sphere through the medium of print' and, in so doing, makes visible some of the uncertain oppositions upon which definitions of 'closet drama' have depended.⁷

A complementary critical trajectory has suggested that the judgement branding *Mariam* as theatrically unviable is premature. This argument holds that we cannot deduce from the absence of evidence for the play's

performance in the seventeenth century a lack of theatrical responsiveness or ambition on Cary's part. As Alison Findlay, Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, and Gweno Williams observe, 'It is mistaken to assume that plays for which we have no production history are unperformable and not even intended for performance'.⁸ This assessment is important because it has consequences for present-day production. As Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince recognize in relation to non-Shakespearean drama, 'there is a connection between the academic labour of ... scholars and ... amateur productions of early modern drama that tend to be concentrated in higher education settings [in that] ... amateur productions and staged readings ... serve as incubators for an interest ... later expressed in fully realised productions at fringe and mainstream theatres'.⁹ *Mariam* demonstrates a similar domino effect, and the most recent scholarly recognition of its theatrical potential has begun to generate real production possibilities.

This essay argues for the uniquely theatrical imprint of *Mariam*. It considers the vital contribution of two 2013 performances of the play — a site-specific production which took place in Burford, Oxfordshire, Cary's birthplace, and a production by the Lazarus Theatre Company. Discussion attends to the means whereby music, stage tableaux, choreography, and painterly effects take up some of the aesthetic prompts the original play provides. Throughout, *Mariam* engages with casting, costume, lighting, set and movement, issues that have mostly been bypassed in Cary studies. The argument has consequences for theatre history, too, challenging the separatism which undoubtedly still obtains, and demanding that the play move inside a less straitjacketed interpretive terrain.

The Text and the Burford Production

Liz Schafer, in an important recent polemic, notes that, 'Certain features of *Mariam* actually suggest that the play was very definitely written with performance in mind[;] ... some aspects ... do not make sense unless the play was performed'.¹⁰ Written for *Times Higher Education*, Schafer's intervention is necessarily brief; even so, she offers several tantalizing examples of these features, referencing, for example, the 'long entrances, typical of the public playhouse, where characters may have to traverse a distance of more than 20 feet before they are fully on stage'.¹¹ These long entrances appear throughout Cary's text (in 1.2, for instance, *Mariam*, spotting her mother, Alexandra, steels herself to stop crying before the latter has entered), despite

such action having no obvious place in a play that, criticism has maintained, Cary intended to be read. Schafer also notes the presence on stage of Herod's attendants.¹² One might add the guards who accompany Babas's sons and the soldiers of act 4 — these personnel are visual signs of Herod's power and menace, although only the soldiers have lines. The 1613 quarto edition does not specify numbers and, hence, typifies what Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson have termed 'permissive stage directions' (directives that leave 'indeterminate ... [the] number of actors required' so as to facilitate a 'variety of actions').¹³ These serve little purpose in a play not designed for some kind of theatrical manifestation. References to costume in *Mariam* are also suggestive. As Schafer recognizes, Herod's costume change, signalled in the dialogue, structures his return.¹⁴ In act 4, Mariam, much to the annoyance of her tyrannical husband, elects to dress herself not in Herod's favoured fashion of 'fair habit' (5.1.142) and 'stately ornament' (5.1.142) but, rather, in black. Mariam's response, as well as her sombre dress, echoes Hamlet, as she states:

I suit my garment to my mind,
And there no cheerful colours can I find. (4.3.5–6)

Like the Shakespearean hero, Mariam constructs her dusky outward appearance as reflecting her inner mood. Elsewhere in the play, not just bodies but also props highlight actions. Such props prominently include both a flower ('Much like this flower which today excels' [3.1.21], states Salome) and a cup ('A drink procuring love' [4.4.1], explains the Butler); cups and flowers were standard theatrical objects, and the gestural lines that accompany their appearance here suggest that, in the playwright's eyes, they lend the play a visual energy.¹⁵

Critical occlusions notwithstanding, the dramatic and theatrical qualities of *Mariam* have had some earlier recognition.¹⁶ Of all the plays belonging to the 'closet drama' genre, *Mariam*, Jonas Barish suggests, was the most eminently stageable in commercial terms. Interestingly, his discussion identifies different performative components from those on which Schafer concentrates. He notes, for example, the play's 'sense of action hastening forward, of event erupting into event and engendering new event, an effect alien to closet drama but familiar on the stage', centring his analysis on one of the play's few actual stage directions.¹⁷ A duelling scene between Constabarus and Silleus (itself an extraordinary scene of action replicated in no other 'closet drama') includes the stage direction, 'They fight' (2.4.92 SD), one of the

mostly frequently used stage directions in the period.¹⁸ Barish writes that the scene is one of ‘stage excitement, with actors who confront each other[,] ... struggle physically [and the action] ... smacks of the rough and tumble of the popular stage’.¹⁹ Certainly, a dynamic force is at work here. The dialogue establishes that blood is noticeable (2.4.67–8); in-text opportunities allow for laboured breathing (2.4.69–70); and the whole scene charts the ebb and flow of an argument that erupts and subsides only to erupt again. Such indications appear not only in the quarto stage direction but also in the need for an additional stage direction indicating struggle (2.4.66 sd), which a theatrically-attentive editor will undoubtedly want to interpolate.

If action is mostly alien to ‘closet drama’, then so too is setting. Far from unfolding in an unspecified place, *Mariam* consistently identifies details of situation which possess a theatrical charge. Locations indicated by action and language include public and private palace spaces, the prison, and the road leading to the scaffold. Interestingly, when John Davies honoured Cary’s achievements as a dramatist in a 1612 treatise, it was her ‘Scenes of ... Palestine’ that he singled out for comment; the imaginative recreation of an Old Testament world, rather than a disquisition on morality and/or political tyranny, was what lodged in the seventeenth-century mind.²⁰ In choosing Jerusalem, Cary was following a number of contemporary dramatic works that used the city as setting.²¹ In addition, by prioritizing a city in this way, *Mariam* shares a kinship with such biblical plays as George Peele’s *David and Bethsabe* (ca 1594), set in Rabba, and Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene’s *A Looking Glass for London and England* (1589–1590), set in Nineveh, works associated with the popular amphitheatres and theatrical ram-bunctiousness. In the gender-inflected criticism on *Mariam*, setting receives scant mention, but, in fact, Jerusalem is hard to ignore, not least in the light of explicit invocations by characters using performatively emphatic styles of direct address. Typical are the scenes of greeting and leave-taking which, implying external settings and therefore establishing for the play an internal-external dynamic, both aid momentum and invite audience participation. At 2.3.8, the returning Doris’s greeting to the ‘fair city’ — like Constabarus’s later leave-taking speech — encourages an audience to read Jerusalem in aesthetic terms, while Herod’s address, ‘Hail, happy city! ... happy that thy buildings such we see!’ (4.1.1–2), explicitly prompts thinking in terms of stagecraft. Both Herod and Doris acknowledge the ‘buildings’ (2.3.1; 4.1.2) of Jerusalem, which implies that they deliver these particular speeches in relation to the structures of the characters’ environs. I do not suggest that

Cary envisaged an actual wall or walls as a theatrical property (although a rudimentary backdrop would not be impossible); rather, I am reflecting on the extent to which she shares a theatrical vocabulary around architecture with her male peers writing for the public stage.²² In short, Jerusalem figures in *Mariam* as a series of performance clues with the potential to function in meaningful dramatic applications that expand the presumed limits of the 'closet drama' designation.

Neither Schafer nor Barish explicitly mention the Chorus to *Mariam*, described in the dramatis personae to the play as 'a company of Jews'. The Chorus represents a grouping of several players, and this assembly of opinion distinguishes itself as an easily identifiable stage presence.²³ Several staging opportunities suggest themselves here; had the play been performed, the Chorus may have remained on stage throughout, a visible reminder of orthodoxy and traditional wisdom. If the Chorus entered and exited at act breaks, such action would have facilitated possibilities for movement and interaction with the rest of the cast. Other representational features allow options too. Curtains and the use of an inner space or balcony would have the effect of marking a spatial and/or hierarchical distance between the Chorus and the actors; the choric dialogue itself generates possibilities for lively debate, which different members of the 'company' delivering different sections of the verse might underline. Nor should an audience assume that the Chorus is a wholly static entity. Gestural pointers, for example, quickly become identifiable: 'Fond wretches, seeking what they cannot find' (1 Chorus.5), the Chorus states, perhaps nodding to departing characters, while elsewhere the 'company' finds a target in the audience itself, observing, 'For if you like your state as now it is, / Why should an alteration bring relief?' (1 Chorus.20–1). Like plays such as Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1588–1589) and Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1599), ample opportunities permit the Chorus in *Mariam* to take up multiple roles in relation to the action as it unfolds.

Because critics are generally inured to thinking that *Mariam* is not an early modern drama, records of the stage history of the play rarely surface to trouble accounts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama in the theatre.²⁴ This issue is raised in catalogue of 'Modern Performances of Plays by Early Modern Women' (pp. 129–32), however, which suggests staged readings, excerpts, and productions continue to demonstrate *Mariam*'s potential theatricality and showcase the ways in which performance decisions have their origins in the play's implied stage business.²⁵ The play's theatrical appeal was evident in an extraordinary piece of theatre directed by Rebecca

McCutcheon in June 2013.²⁶ As a director, McCutcheon has established a name for herself by demonstrating via site-specific performance the dynamic stage attributes of neglected early modern dramas.²⁷ Her *Mariam* production took place in Burford Church, Burford, Oxfordshire, and formed part of a larger initiative (organized by Liz Schafer), the ‘Mariam Project’, which involves stagings of parts of the play in different venues. Of course, quite possibly, Cary wrote *Mariam* with a particular venue in mind, and thus Schafer makes logistical sense in prompting us to think about the play in site-specific ways. Schafer also had a biographical rationale for the conjunction with Burford — Cary was brought up in Burford Priory and would have attended the church (the ruff worn by *Mariam* is a gesture to the famous copper-plate engraving of Cary in which she sports a similar accessory). An energetic delivery characterized the production itself: the director used the whole church (the audience’s attention being directed to features such as the old turret clock and the mullioned, medieval stained-glass windows), with members of the cast climbing the altar and running through the aisles in a manner that brought to the drama a lively athleticism. Space in the church belonged wholly to the cast, as in, for example, the realization of 1.3: *Mariam* and *Salome* shout at each other across the distance of the nave from the transepts, an index of the psychic distance separating them. Weather-beaten and imposing, the church doors are deployed as an effective means of entrance and egress: hence, *Doris* opens them to greet *Jerusalem*, falling on the ground (‘You royal buildings, bow your lofty side’ [2.3.1]), and then picking herself up, in what is a necessarily extended arrival scene. On occasion, the specifics of the venue allowed for a provocative interplay of meanings. So, terms connotative of Jewish identity — and taunts such as ‘parti-Jew’ (1.3.29) and ‘parti-Edomite’ (1.3.29) — echoed through the vaulted arches and stood out in the Christian setting. In contrast, formulations such as ‘Why, then, be witness, heaven’ (1.6.63) were nicely complemented, finding a ready home in the ecclesiastical context.

Perhaps most significantly for the production, church monuments afforded a resonant backdrop, not least the statue of Cary herself kneeling at the tomb of her parents. Uniquely, the seventeenth-century monument shows Cary looking on beside the effigies of her mother and father; by association, these family figures are the guardians of the performance in their midst. Further associations gathered about the Cary effigy, for this production emphasized the spaces of the author’s early years. The cast is mainly youthful, and the performers’ fresh-faced appearance reminds us that *Mariam* was among

Cary's first works. Indeed, Mariam herself, in comparison with actresses who have played the part in other productions, is noticeably child-like, wearing a white and gold dress, flats and ankle socks, pearls and a locket, all suggestive of infantilism. Her weeping and mood swings are similarly evocative of a lack of maturity. Not surprisingly, then, this production of *Mariam* has as title, in acknowledgement of the adaptive impulses behind it, *Youth and Young Girlhood*.

The opening chorus (young voices joined in harmony) and the distinctive activities taking place in various parts of the church afford immediate engagement with the 'youth' interpretation. As this pre-show unfolds, we witness a series of individual character compositions set against the magnificent backcloth of internal chapels, dappled reflections, sepulchres, and the sanctuary. Salome, for instance, artfully posing with a mirror that betokens an absorption in self, simultaneously endeavours to cut through a tangle of threads and cords so as to reach the spectators (her pledge, 'I'll be the custom-breaker and begin / To show my sex the way to freedom's door' [1.4.49–50], hovers as a sub-text). Meanwhile, Constabarus roams the aisle, greeting the incoming audience and shaking hands (hinting at his discourse on 'friendship' [2.2.13]) in the same moment as he demands: 'Are Hebrew women now transformed to men?' (1.6.47). An older Doris sits alone, explaining conversationally to anyone who will listen the difficulties leading up to the break-up of her marriage. Also present is Elizabeth Cary herself; the author is busily at work, scribbling down ideas inspired by the sublime architecture. All the characters interact with the audience directly, breaking down barriers and ensuring responsiveness to later, more formal rhetorical addresses. As the director explains, 'offering direct audience/performer relationships' helps 'our audience connect with a play which is challenging to stage in conventional settings'.²⁸

Crucially, Mariam is a doubled part (that is, two actresses play the role, sometimes delivering their lines simultaneously from opposite ends of the church site). Immediately inscribed in the dramaturgy is a sense of two aspects of a vexed personality. One Mariam, then, appears at the baptism font beginning her opening soliloquy ('How oft with public voice have I run on' [1.1.1]); she grips the elaborately carved fixture, shouting down into it in an irreverent demonstration of a desire to be heard. In the same moment, the other Mariam struggles inside the enclosure surrounding the Cary family monument; agitated, she hits her head against the tomb, climbs the windows and swings on the rails, each of her actions connoting a chafing against

familial restrictions. Complementary visions of Mariam find symbolic capital in the resonances of the church's spatial arrangements.

Prioritizing the interior struggle means that the director robs *Mariam* of some of its political import, becoming more focused on the domestic drama. The cuts reinforce this choice (Alexandra, Silleus, and, most significantly, Herod, are removed), the consequence of which is a more concentrated grouping of characters linked by tightened points of contact. In part, the audience experiences the characters as connected via acoustic means (they join in choral music); at other points, characters appear as one cohesive entity because explicitly summoned by choric authority. Bringing to mind a 1995 Royal Holloway production, Cary and the Chorus are one and the same, a move which facilitates a knowing self-consciousness (as when she nods to the Cary effigy, identifies the author, and invites applause). As she recites the 'Argument', Cary/Chorus identifies each of the cast by name and recounts individual histories, thereby clarifying roles and making meanings concrete. The procedure generated a number of comic interpolations in its wake: 'It's complicated' was an addition that provoked ironic laughter. As author and Chorus, Cary is throughout in charge, inaugurating the singing, signalling its cessation, as would an orchestral maestro, and stalking the edges of the performance, her hands held in prayer for its successful outcome.

Throughout, the Burford production was creative with characterization. Constabarus often accompanied Cary, as Chorus; the association augments his part, particularly at the points where he walks with the Chorus as an adjunct or support. Even with heavy cuts, the virtues of Cary's dramatic method is evident; despite the removal of the scenes with Babas's sons, for example, Constabarus retained a sympathetic edge, particularly in the light of the detailing of his marriage breakdown. What was lost from the play, then, allowed for amplification and nuance in other areas. Doris is a case in point; with Herod and Alexandra removed, she fills the gap vacated by representatives of seniority and, as an older woman, engages the audience in intimate ways: 'Do you have children?', she asks, adding, 'Boys?'. Through such exchanges, the actress playing Doris was able to establish a rapport, particularly with older audience members, and her widow's garb (emblematic of rejection/bereavement), huge case (suggestive of homelessness), and toy train and rattle (connotative of children now lost) heightened the empathetic notes struck in her performance.

As with earlier readings and performances of *Mariam*, the Burford production allowed for new explorations of the text, thereby adding ballast to

the play's capacity not only for actors to perform effectively, but also, and like any of Shakespeare's works, for directors to appropriate and revisit the text in imaginative and enlightening ways. If nothing else, this manifestation of the play spotlighted a highly theatrical register, one that we also saw demonstrated, in 2013, in the Lazarus production to which discussion now turns.

The Lazarus Production

In August 2013, *Mariam* was staged as part of London's Camden Fringe Festival by the Lazarus Theatre Company. Lazarus is an experimental company that deploys a medley of performance styles — 'text, movement and music through the use of ensemble' — so as to make older drama newly accessible.²⁹ The production took place in the Tristan Bates Theatre's small black box space — a dark, intimate, and even slightly claustrophobic setting which threw into stark relief the spacious and airy environs of Burford's church. The audience enters to a visually and acoustically evocative introductory tableau. Inside the dimly lit and smoky atmosphere of the black box, the cast, singing together, moves in slow motion about the stage. Through dance-like, choreographed movements, an audience, as Camilla Gurtler notes, 'is lured into a world of sex, power and passion ... [and finds] it is ravishing watching the women move in the space'.³⁰ Such an inauguration also helps to suggest the play's early modern origins, hinting at masque-like elements and an aristocratic provenance. As in the masque, this version of Cary's play encouraged us to recognize how sound and physicality combine in cross-fertilizing ways. Shared actions suggest not only an ensemble piece but also a chorus of opinion and interpretation (the play's Chorus, or '*company of Jews*', is the full female cast). As for the choric song, its solemn, operatic overtones highlight the implications of the lyrics, taken from Constabarus's speech about a 'world' that has been 'topsy-turned quite' (1.6.50). Transposing the speech so that it frontloads the production is an ambitious move, one that establishes disruption and inversion as dominant appropriative motifs. The production features amputation as well as transposition. In a show marked by substantial cuts (the performance is just one hour long), the male characters are the most obvious casualties; either their lines transfer to female characters or are omitted altogether. Because only one male role remains — that of Herod — his place takes on a particularly patriarchal force. In interview, the director remarks that Herod's 'absence frees ... all [women] of ... normal social conventions'.³¹ Judged against the production's opening stress on carnival

release, the appearance of Herod, when it does take place, is all the more devastating and dramatic.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the space is the black floor strewn with rose petals. Scattered willy-nilly about the playing area, the petals dominate the production, their deep red appearance forming the central visual conceit. Gurtler notes that the 'design is so stunning that you sometimes ... believe you are in a painting by a remarkable artist' and, certainly, from the design, several felicitous interpretive moments emerge.³² When the Chorus asks, for example, 'Why on the ridge should she desire to go?' (3 Chorus.8), we can glimpse Mariam precariously walking a tightrope at the roses' edge. Similarly, act 2, scene 1 — the amatory dialogue between Pheroras and Graphina — becomes a wedding, the petals substituting for confetti and members of the Chorus playing the role of bridesmaids. Of course, in their traditional associations, roses connote love and beauty and, in reifying the flower in this fashion, the production shows itself sensitive to some of the play's core themes. Beauty is a key identifier in Cary's dramatic imagination, and, in the play text, we meet women primarily through their appearance. We thus discover Salome as 'beauty's queen' (1.5.23), while the script deems Mariam, a woman famed for her physical attributes, incomparable because of her 'cheek of roses' (4.8.6). Attentive to the performance opportunities made available by the text, the Lazarus production notably deploys its rose-covered locale as a contemporary rendering of the clichés of Renaissance poetry.

In the production itself, Mariam, unlike the Burford production, is cast as an older beauty; maturity suggests itself in her hairstyle and dress, with emphasis on her perfect makeup and red lipstick. Graphina, the only one of the company attired in white (as befits her bridal status) offsets both Mariam and Doris in their clothes and appearance. Costume and jewelry convey revealing commentary on status; Mariam's elaborate neckwear, in particular, points to a queenly identification. As Mariam, Celine Abrahams radiates a supreme royal self-confidence, made all the more forceful by a performance of quiet dignity and resolute integrity. This demeanour contrasts wonderfully with Paula James's playing of the Salome role; stunning to look at, especially exposed in her long black dress, her character explodes with temper and gusts of passion that draw attention to Mariam's more understated mien. Crucially, the roses that adorn the stage form part of a constantly changing pattern as characters dance on the petals and send them flying, perhaps indicative of the ways in which the text stresses love and beauty as transient. '[B]eauty is a blast', Salome states, 'Much like this flower which

today excels, / But longer than a day it will not last' (3.1.20–2). In the production, roses also unite motifs of beauty and mortality. We see the motif in the on-stage death of Sohemus; as his/her is throat cut by mask-wearing players, rose petals flood extravagantly from his/her mouth. Once again, the theatricality of the moment has a textual warrant, for, in the play, Mariam goes to the scaffold reflecting on the beauty/death conjunction:

I ... thought my beauty such
As it alone could countermand my death.
Now Death will teach me he can pale as well
A cheek of roses as a cheek less bright ... (4.8.3–6)

Aligning herself against Petrarchan conceits of beauty, Mariam recognizes that beauty cannot save her. For the Lazarus *Mariam*, such moments of inward perception translate eloquently into physical actions and stage aesthetics.

Like the roses, the cast, forming part of the Chorus when not in character, remains on stage throughout. At times, carefully choreographed lighting and smoke effects block out the Chorus, singling out individual personalities. Hence, after the pre-show musical realization of Constabarus's speech, Mariam steps forward, her body illuminated by spotlights, to deliver 'How oft have I with public voice run on' (1.1.1): the moment marks not only her disentangling herself from her choric function but also the commencement of the play proper. The production, then, dispenses with Cary's substantial 'Argument', instead investing in a suggestive portrayal of a time and a place. Here, the Constabarus soliloquy/song again facilitates our responsiveness, not least through references to 'Palestine' (1.6.67), 'David's city' (1.6.68), and the 'land of Ham' (1.6.72): the lines/lyrics are indicative of Jewish identity and Jerusalem at the height of its powers. Because the director cut the explanatory apparatus, the back-story to the play needs filling out in other ways. In the scene where Salome explains the complications of her amatory involvements, for instance, three women wearing masks extract themselves from the Chorus and advance out of the smoke, their forms clearly substituting for the three lovers, past, present, and future. At the mention of Josephus (1.4.27), a fourth figure steps forward, a visual embodiment of an entangled erotic scenario. Highly theatricalized moments surrogate for the missing 'Argument' and its explanatory operations.

Lazarus has distinguished itself by producing plays with strong female roles; notable is the 2012 all-female production of *Women of Troy*. And in

adapting *Mariam*, Lazarus demonstrates receptiveness to one of the most established trends in criticism of the play, the woman-centred interpretation. The particular orientation arises not only by cutting the majority of the male roles but also by expanding and amplifying the female ones. The director describes being ‘struck by Cary’s amazing number of varied and strong female characters ... each [with] ... a prominence and voice’.³³ Carrying this emphasis forward, Gavin Harrington-Odedra, the director, centres the production around a series of female monologues. These build upon Cary’s dramaturgy by strengthening the three central female performances — those of *Mariam*, *Alexandra*, and *Salome* — and adding a fourth, that of *Graphina*. Lighting and movement to the centre-front of stage mean that, in turn, *Mariam*, *Alexandra*, *Salome*, and *Graphina* all acquire individual prioritization. Particularly in the case of *Graphina*, the transposition of lines (she speaks *Pheroras*’s speech beginning ‘the holy priest ... The happy long-desired knot shall tie’ [2.1.2–3]) and the physical fading into the background of her lover have the effect of endowing her with a rhetorical authority disallowed by the original. This shift in focus has the virtue of bringing out tensions and discontinuities in the women’s relationships. Blocking, as in the scene between *Mariam*, *Alexandra*, and *Salome* (1.3), often stresses a venomous antagonism, despite the formality of the language. Elsewhere, the illumination of a spotlight — as at *Salome*’s ‘More plotting yet?’ (1.3.1) — works to create an impression of fraught rivalries.

Competition inheres most controversially in the production’s retention of many of the play’s racist referents. In the text, beauty often expresses itself with a racialized rhetoric. In particular, in contrast to *Mariam*’s physical appearance, *Salome*, as *Dympna Callaghan* recognizes, ‘is conspicuously dark’.³⁴ This colouring gets expressed most obviously in *Herod*’s expostulation that *Salome*, when seen beside *Mariam*, appears ‘a sunburnt black-amoor’ (4.7.106). Casting decisions assist the production in its elaboration of a contest between the leading women: *Mariam* appears as olive skinned, while *Salome* is darker in complexion, a visual distinction that points to the play’s uncomfortable racial politics. In one sense, *Doris* too could be said to be a participant in the play’s racializing procedures, not least when she brands *Mariam* as possessing a ‘soul’ that is ‘black and spotted’ (4.8.52), and yet, interestingly, this character is the exception to the rule that the production changes women’s roles in order to push them to the dramatic forefront. In her appearances, when *Doris* talks to her son, *Antipater*, she addresses only a mask in his image; recalling the familiar diptych of *Vindice*

in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) addressing the skull of his lover, the equivalent scenes in the Lazarus production help to explain Doris's evident rage. Consequently, Doris, in contradistinction to the Burford production, appears most obviously as a figure of pathos. In this context, the scene (4.8) between Mariam and Doris has a less agonistic dimension, the former kneeling before the latter in a moment of feeling accord. Far from separating the respective claims and grievances of the two women, the production here elects to elide them.

The arrival of Ananell violently unmoors the female utopia introduced at the start: his/her news that Herod is alive and well becomes the delivery of a set-piece, the shock of a repressive turn serving as counterpoint to the emancipated tenor of the start. As the director explains, the utopia that has initially flourished is dashed — 'to ... devastating effect'.³⁵ Indicating their traumatic reaction to the announcement, Ananell and Graphina freeze in an instance of physical movement embodying dramatic interpretation. Cross-cutting helps to broaden the significance of Herod's imminent return; the lights, in a quasi-cinematic manner, switch between the two pairs of women on stage, Salome and Graphina, and Mariam and Sohemus, and thereby underscore the stichomythic nature of their truncated dialogue. We are left with Sohemus's speech on the 'Poor guiltless queen' (3.3.63) which, delivered directly to the audience, plays up the idea of a defenceless and soon-to-be-vilified Mariam, an idea brought home by Mariam's own withdrawal to the darkness of the Chorus.

Unsettling, excessive, and portentous — these are among the characteristics of Herod's entrance. The 'Be witness ... Palestine; / Be witness, David's city' (1.6.68–9) refrain from the start (Constabarus's inversion speech) sounds again, drawing a parallel with the production's inauguration. Herod himself appears in military uniform (a reading justified by the play's specification of 'soldiers'), a pointer not only to his tyrant-like designation but also to the nature of a new regime. Blocking and choreography suggest a change in the disposition of power and, with the king's return, utopian freedoms quickly give way to uncompromising dominion. The on-stage death of Sohemus grants to Herod's line, 'do as much for Mariam' (4.4.75), a genuine force and threat. If there is a constant in Mariam in the final scenes, it is (following many critical readings) the constancy of the martyr. The 'farewell' (4.8.103) induces a heartfelt resignation, with only the mention of Mariam's sons prompting a brief emotional response. One of the striking features of *Mariam* (as in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*) is that the female lead

disappears at the end of act 4 and is thereafter only present via report. This disappearance could make for an anti-climax in the theatre, but the Lazarus production avoided the possibility by action unfolding alongside the Nuntio's account of Mariam's fate. While the Nuntio, distinctively official in pearls and a pencil skirt, begins her message, we glimpse Mariam on her knees, surrounded by the rest of the cast. As the narrative continues, Mariam mounts the scaffold-like shape formed by the other characters. Abruptly, corpse-like, she then falls backwards; Mariam's 'dying tale' (5.1.17) directly implicates the cast/chorus that comments on her conduct.

Retaining Mariam in the production's final stages casts a shadow over Herod and the scene of his anguished and neurotic recollections. 'She's dead' (5.1.149), Herod states, directing his eventual admission of the truth to the spectators in the theatre; we, too, are identified as complicit. In part, the production engineers a closer identification with the actor by fading out the Chorus (the practicalities of the lighting are again interpretive) and by playing up the admonitory effects of the tyrant's closing speech. The prevalence of 'you' and 'your' formulations in the play's language prove generative, with Herod pointing an accusatory finger at the audience even as he also faces his own culpability: 'I am the villain' (5.1.187). This crazed and tearful peroration culminates in an alarm sounding, a sign, perhaps, of a third political dispensation in the offing. And, if the Chorus enters to have the final word, then that word can only emphasize that all in the production play seminal roles to bring alive this hitherto mostly 'closeted' performance work. We are left with lines on the floor marking where the bodies have been; Mariam's form is indicated in white, as befits a female protagonist martyred for a cause, while the rose petals remain, telling signs of an evanescent utopia and the bloody regime to which it cedes place.

Future Productions

This essay suggests that we also need time for regime change in theatre history. As these two 2013 productions illustrate, we cannot now doubt that *Mariam* is an actable theatrical entity. The play is one that invites and enables a spectrum of performance options, from site-specific to London fringe. The play is excitingly compatible with different kinds of theatrical space, both traditional and experimental, and such is the nature of *Mariam* that it can appear as much about the Middle East as about Middle England. For Cary's creation runs the gamut of theatrical interpretations, alternately taking on

domestic and political complexions according to cuts and adjustments in focus. It offers consistently engaging contrasts in characterization, including the potential for differently rendered versions of Mariam herself.

Mariam can no longer remain the construct promulgated in previous critical imaginaries. The text enfolds not only multiple performance possibilities but also a plurality of readings; hence, it rightly attracts companies and groups attuned to its suggestiveness, its readiness for appropriation and its plasticity in the hands of creative practitioners. Language ignites particular staging moments, and theatre makers have opportunities, inscribed in the text's specification of off-stage events, that they can translate into on-stage action. The situation promises a smooth alliance between what the text lays down and theatrical techniques — such as doubling, lighting, and music — that, together, demonstrate how an old play reverberates in the contemporary. Seeing *Mariam* in a theatrical guise transforms our sense of Cary's achievement, allowing the work a social and cultural hinterland that a concentration on the solitary writer precludes. And, in a modern context in which women playwrights remain under-represented, the newly pertinent Cary indicates a way ahead, pointing to the potential of future productions and the capacity of *Mariam* to make a difference in the present.

Notes

- 1 See Karen Raber (ed.), *Elizabeth Cary*, Ashgate Critical Essays on Women Writers in England, 1550–1700 (Farnham, 2009); Heather Wolfe (ed.), *The Literary Career and Legacy of Elizabeth Cary, 1613–1680* (New York, 2007).
- 2 According to Marta Straznicky, a 'closet drama' can be defined as 'a play that was either never intended for performance or never performed': 'Closet Drama', Arthur F. Kinney (ed.), *A Companion to Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 2002), 416. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/b.9781405121798.2004.x>.
- 3 Jeremy Lopez, *Constructing the Canon of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2014), 18. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139344128>.
- 4 Richard Bellings, *A Sixth Booke to the Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia* (London, 1624; STC: 1805), A2^r; John Marston, *The Workes* (London, 1633; STC: 17471), A4^r. A lost Cary play is referenced in the dedication 'To Diana's Earthly Deputess' in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, ed. Ramona Wray (London, 2012), 14. Unless otherwise stated, subsequent citations from the play will appear in parentheses in the text.

- 5 For the interrelations between Cary and Shakespeare, see essays by Elizabeth Gruber and Maureen Quilligan in Raber (ed.), *Cary*, 476–94, 527–51.
- 6 See R.V. Holdsworth, 'Middleton and *Mariam*', *Notes and Queries* 33.3 (1986), 379–80; Richard Levin, 'A possible source of *A Fair Quarrel*', *Notes and Queries* 30.2 (1983), 152–3.
- 7 Marta Straznicky, *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama, 1550–1700* (Cambridge, 2004), 1. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/20478149>.
- 8 Alison Findlay, Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, and Gweno Williams, *Women and Dramatic Production, 1550–1700* (Harlow, 2000), 3. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315840253>.
- 9 Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince, 'Introduction', Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince (eds), *Performing Early Modern Drama Today* (Cambridge, 2012), 12. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139047975>.
- 10 Liz Schafer, 'An early modern feminist', *Times Higher Education*, 6 June (2013), <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/an-early-modern-feminist/2004327.article?nopaging=1>.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642* (Cambridge, 1999), 161.
- 14 Schafer, 'An early modern feminist'.
- 15 See Dessen and Thomson, *Dictionary*, 62 and 94–5.
- 16 See, for example, the discussions of the play and performance in: *The Tragedy of Mariam*, ed. Stephanie Hodgson-Wright (Peterborough, 2000), 27–32; *The Tragedy of Mariam*, ed. Stephanie J. Wright (Keele, 1996), 20–3.
- 17 Jonas Barish, 'Language for the Study; Language for the Stage', A.L. Magnusson and C.E. McGee (eds), *The Elizabethan Theatre XII* (Toronto, 1993), 38.
- 18 Dessen and Thomson, *Dictionary*, 91–2.
- 19 Barish, 'Language', 39.
- 20 John Davies, *The Muses Sacrifice* (London, 1612; src: 6338), *3^v.
- 21 See, for example, Thomas Heywood, *The Four Prentices of London* (ca 1594), Thomas Legge, *Destruction of Jerusalem* (ca 1580), John Smith, *The Destruction of Jerusalem* (1584) and the anonymous *Titus and Vespasian* (1591).
- 22 See, for example, the specification of both Barkloughly Castle and Flint Castle in Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. Charles R. Forker (London, 2002), 3.2 and 3.3.
- 23 As Dessen and Thomson note, although the chorus is often a single figure, there are also choruses made up of several figures, including shepherds, swains, and musicians (*Dictionary*, 48–9).

- 24 See, for example, Jeremy Lopez, 'Performances of early modern drama at academic institutions since 1909' and 'Performances of early modern plays by amateur and student groups since 1887', Appendices 2 and 3 in Aebischer and Prince (eds), *Performing*, 218–24 and 225–7.
- 25 See Catherine Schuler and Sharon Ammen, 'Attending to Renaissance Women: A Script and Its Evolution', Betty S. Travitsky and Adele F. Seeff (eds), *Attending to Women in Early Modern England* (Newark, 1994), 343–55. See also Alison Findlay, Gweno Williams, and Stephanie J. Hodgson-Wright, "'The play is ready to be acted": Women and dramatic production, 1570–1670', *Women's Writing* 6.1 (1999), 129–48. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09699089900200053>.
- 26 See the description at http://www.burfordfestival.org/Events_Daily/Mariam.html.
- 27 See <http://rebeccamccutcheon.com> and Rebecca McCutcheon and Sarah Thom, 'Dido, Queen of Carthage: Site-Specific Marlowe', Aebischer and Prince (eds), *Performing*, 104–20.
- 28 McCutcheon and Thom, 'Dido', 120.
- 29 Lazarus Theatre Company, *Mariam*, programme note (August 2013), 2.
- 30 Camilla Gurtler, 'Camden Fringe Review: *Mariam*', <http://www.ayoungerttheatre.com>.
- 31 Greg Jameson, 'Gavin Harrington-Odedra Interview', *Entertainment Focus*, 23 July (2013), <http://entertainment-focus.com>.
- 32 Gurtler, 'Camden Fringe Review: *Mariam*'.
- 33 Lazarus Theatre Company, programme note, 2.
- 34 Dymrna Callaghan, 'Re-reading Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedie of Mariam, Faire Queene of Jewry*', Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (eds), *Women, 'Race' and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London and New York, 1994), 175. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203388891>.
- 35 Lazarus Theatre Company, programme note, 2.