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Performing Pedagogy in Early Modern England

Gender, Instruction, and Performance

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ASHGATE

Chapter 15
Acting Virtuous:
Chastity, Theatricality, and
The Tragedie of Mariam

Kent R. Lehnhof

Suzanne Hull and many others have amply established that early modern women were relentlessly instructed to be chaste, silent, and obedient.¹ The first of these terms, however, poses significant problems. Whereas “silence” and “obedience” would appear to be relatively straightforward—dependent upon and displayed through acts of outward compliance—“chastity” is considerably more complicated. Even in its premarital formations, when it might be narrowly construed as “virginity” and connected to a condition of corporeal intactness, chastity is neither easy to understand nor establish. Recent work in literature, religion, history, and medicine has emphasized how efforts to define and assess virginity from patristic times to the present have been beset by uncertainty.² These myriad problems only multiply when chastity is expanded to include those who are married. Although the chastity of maids can be connected (at least theoretically or fantastically) to an inviolate anatomy, this condition does not survive the sexual consummation of marriage, requiring the chastity of wives to be envisioned alternatively. Conjugality, by further separating the condition of sexual purity from the state of sexual innocence or inexperience, complicates what is already an epistemological conundrum. Especially where wives are concerned, chastity must be interiorized, increasingly associated with internal conditions (such as affective fidelity or an unspotted will) rather than external ones (such as an intact hymen).

Notwithstanding this persistent confusion regarding chastity’s essence and expression, the one point on which nearly everyone agrees is that chastity is fundamentally a female virtue. As Kathleen Coyne Kelly remarks, “The rhetoric

¹ See Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475–1640* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1982).

² See Marie H. Loughlin, *Hymeneutics: Interpreting Virginity on the Early Modern Stage* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1997), esp. 27–52; Kathleen Coyne Kelly, “Menaced Masculinity and Imperiled Virginity in the *Morte Darthur*,” *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie, eds. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 97–114; and Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. 1–39.

of virginity, no matter the discourse, is always overtly feminized.”³ Countless texts from the early modern era attest to the association of chastity with women. Indeed, a number of Renaissance writers indicate that chastity is not merely a feminine virtue but *the* feminine virtue. For instance, Juan Luis Vives states in his influential *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* that “a woman hath no charge to se to, but her honestie and chastyte. Wherefore whan she is enfurmed of that, she is sufficiently appoynted.”⁴ Elsewhere in the treatise, Vives advises: “[N]o man wyl loke for any other thing of a woman, but her honestye: the whiche only, if hit be lacked, is lyke as in a man, if he lacke al that he shuld have. For in a woman the honestie is in stede of all.”⁵ By collapsing women’s virtue into a single attribute—sexual purity—Vives shows how completely chastity is feminized in the early modern period. But he also suggests the extent to which early modern discussions of female virtue are informed by an abiding skepticism in women’s moral capacities. Whereas men are expected to be “all,” women are merely expected to be “honest”—and it is unlikely they can manage even this much on their own.

As Nancy Weitz Miller demonstrates, Vives repeatedly endorses the idea that women are defective in the management of their passions. While careful instruction can improve a Christian woman in this regard, it cannot profoundly change her. Consequently, those who wish to preserve the chastity of their daughters ought to take matters into their own hands and impose strict physical and social restraints. “[W]han [girls] begynne to growe from childe state . . .,” Vives counsels, “holde them from mennes company. For that tyme they be geven unto most lust of the body.” According to Vives, the way to raise an honest daughter is to sequester her at home: “Therefore a mayde shulde go but seldome abrode: bycause she neyther hath any busynes forth, and standethe ever in jeopardde of her chastite, the moste precious thyng that she hath.”⁶ As Miller remarks: “Vives’s method of instruction here has little to do with the conduct or behavior of the maid herself: his answer is external control and prohibition.”⁷ But this program of external control and prohibition does not restrict only a woman’s mobility. It also regulates her reading, her dress, her grooming, her demeanor: almost every aspect of life from childhood through widowhood. Ultimately, Vives entrusts very little to the woman with which *The Instruction* is concerned. Doubtful that women can discipline themselves, Vives urges others to do it for them.

³ Kelly, “Menaced Masculinity,” 103.

⁴ Juan Luis Vives, *A very frutefull and pleasant boke called the Instruction of a Christen Woman*, trans. Richard Hyrde (London: Thomas Berthelet, 1529), sig. B2r.

⁵ Vives, *Instruction of a Christen Woman*, sig. G4r.

⁶ Vives, *Instruction of a Christen Woman*, sig. G4v, sig. K4r.

⁷ Nancy Weitz Miller, “Metaphor and the Mystification of Chastity in Vives’s *Instruction of a Christen Woman*,” *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie, eds. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 138.

Vives's pessimistic view of women's capacity for self-government is widespread in the early modern era. In the middle of his famous essay "On Friendship," for instance, Michel de Montaigne pauses to point out that women are precluded from participating in relationships of perfect amity on account of their innate weakness. "The ordinary sufficiency of women," he writes, "cannot answer this conference and communication, the nurse of this sacred bond: nor seeme their mindes strong enough to endure the pulling of a knot so hard, so fast, and durable."⁸ In fine phallogocratic fashion, Montaigne maintains that women are inherently unfit for the interpersonal interactions and subjective positions that he envisions at the apex of early modern society.

On the other side of the Channel, the Anglican Church incorporated a similarly sexist disregard into its most orthodox expressions of doctrine. The 1563 "Homely of the State of Matrimonye"—ordered to be read annually from every parish pulpit in England—exhorts husbands to exercise patience toward their wives by explaining that women are inferior beings:

For the woman is a weake creatur, not endued with like strength and constancie of mynd, therefore they be the so[o]ner disquieted, and they be the more prone to all weake affections and dispositions of mynde, more then men be, and lighter they be, and more vayne in theyr fantasies and opinions. These things must be considered of the man, that he be not to styffe, so that he ought to wynke at some thynges, and must gentellye expounde all thynges, and to forbear.⁹

Leveraging in the interests of marital harmony the New Testament notion of woman as the "weaker vessell" (1 Peter 3:7), the homily articulates a fundamentally antifeminist domestic ideal.

But one need not go to church to be tutored in women's weakness and inconstancy. Antifeminism in the early modern period is a secular truth as well as a sacred one, a biological fact as well as a biblical tenet. As Maria Prendergast writes:

Aristotle's treatises are the main authority to which Renaissance writers turned in order to locate precedents for defining women as seductive, deceitful, and unruly. This essentialist construction of women is perhaps most famously articulated in *The History of Animals*, 9.1, where Aristotle characterizes women as irrational, violent, shameless, and deceitful. The notion is extended in the *Politics* and *Physics*, where Aristotle affirms woman's unruly nature and states that her threatening nature can only be controlled if, under the tutelage of male authority figures, she is trained to be passive, silent, and chaste—the

⁸ Michel de Montaigne, "Of Friendship," *The Essayes of Montaigne: John Florio's Translation*, Bennett A. Cerf and Donald S. Klopfer, eds. (New York: The Modern Library, 1933), 147.

⁹ "An Homely of the State of Matrimonie," *The seconde Tome of homelyes of such matters as were promised and intituled in the former part of Homelyes* (London: Richard Jugge and John Cawood, 1563), fol. 257v.

very characteristics that formed the basis for Renaissance polemical treatises on the nature of women.¹⁰

While it is true that a few Renaissance writers resist this unflattering outlook and profess women's moral equality with men, they can do so only by rejecting the physiological and philosophical teachings of the time. To argue in favor of women's virtue is to distort or ignore established truths and time-honored ideals. "If complete consistency with peripatetic teaching is sought," Ian Maclean explains, "the most that can be afforded to woman is an imperfect moral existence."¹¹

She is often afforded much less. A number of early modern authors indicate that female virtue is not merely "imperfect" but utterly nonexistent. As Sheila Cavanagh observes, "many writers during this period ... present views of women from which the possibility of virtue seems excluded." By way of illustration, Cavanagh cites the *Discourse of the Married and Single Life*, which argues that a woman's will can be neither successfully satisfied nor safely suppressed. "If thou fulfilllest all her desires," the anonymous pamphleteer advises, "thou makest her unbridled and licentious./ If thou doest not fulfill them, shee will then always be melancholy or wrathful." William Whateley's stance on female depravity is even more untoward. Referring to the faults of women, Whateley writes:

Good bringing up may conceale them; good instructions may diminish; and good nature, for a while, may keep them under, and keepe them secret: yea, the worke of grace may mortifie, quell, and over-master them; but nothing can altogether roote them out, so long as flesh and spirit do strive together in one soule; that is, so long as soule and bodie doe live together in this life.¹²

As Cavanagh explains, Whateley's cynical assessment indicates that a "good" woman is merely a perfidious woman in disguise or remission.¹³ Insofar as woman (in Whateley's view) is incapable of inward honor, the best she can do is simulate it at a surface level. By denying that women possess the inward qualities that provide the ground for authentically good behavior, Whateley and his cohort affirm that female virtue is never more than skin deep. No more than a simulacrum or a dissembling, female virtue is always and only an act.

The conviction that women can only simulate honor or integrity both confirms and complicates the antifeminist discourses of early modern England. While writers like Whateley repeatedly point to women's expertness in deception as

¹⁰ Maria Teresa Micaela Prendergast, *Renaissance Fantasies* (Kent, OH and London: Kent State University Press, 1999), 5.

¹¹ Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 52.

¹² William Whateley, *A Care-cloth: Or a Treatise of the Cumbers and Troubles of Marriage* (London: Felix Kyngston for Thomas Man, 1624), 44–5.

¹³ Sheila T. Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires: Female Sexuality in The Faerie Queene* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 9.

evidence of their treacherous nature and moral inferiority, the duplicity that these authors decry is the very thing they end up encouraging. Even as they fault women for dissembling, antifeminists incite them to additional acts of insincerity—instructing them to feign the virtue that is supposed to be foreign to them. Like Prince Hamlet, who tells his mother to “assume a virtue if you have it not,” early modern antifeminists admonish women to perform the goodness that, according to these very authors, they do not and cannot possess.¹⁴

For antifeminist authors, then, the problem of female theatricality resides primarily in the particulars. Insofar as it is impossible for women to align their actions with an inner truth (both “inner” and “truth” being inapplicable in the case of women), women can never stop dissembling: they can only dissemble differently. Consequently, the design of antifeminist diatribe does not aim at the prevention of female theatricality so much as it does the privileging of certain roles over others. Seen in this light, the all-too-familiar command that women be chaste, silent, and obedient does not insist upon real female virtue but only adumbrates a preferred performative role, one that enables women to simulate the virtuous condition that is beyond their capacities and constitution.

In this manner, the pervasive Renaissance prescription “chaste, silent, and obedient” constitutes what Pierre Bourdieu would call a “repertoire of rules”: “a predetermined set of discourses and actions” that is “forced on agents or groups when they lack practical mastery of a highly valued competence.” Bourdieu develops the concept while contemplating the situation of the ethnographic observer, the outsider who has no proper place in the cultural system he or she studies and who is consequently alienated from “the real play of social activities.” According to Bourdieu, the ethnographic observer cannot rely upon “practical mastery, the prerogative of the native” and is therefore compelled to devise and adopt semiformalized rules for behavior. To compensate for his or her social estrangement and to navigate an alien culture, the ethnographer seeks to codify native practices, creating for him or herself a repertoire of rules that Bourdieu likens to a “rôle” or a “stage-part.”¹⁵

Like the ethnographic outsider in Bourdieu’s account, early modern women can be said to have no proper place in early modern society. On the basis of their sex, women are largely alienated from “the real play of social activities.” And just as cultural difference prevents Bourdieu’s ethnographic outsider from ever attaining “practical mastery, the prerogative of the native,” sexual difference (and the moral inferiority ostensibly attendant upon it) prevents Renaissance women from ever achieving actual virtue, the prerogative of men. Adjudged incapable of the virtues at the core of early modern value systems, women are assigned a semiformalized role that is supposed to serve as a substitute. “Chaste, silent, and

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, The Norton Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt et al., ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 3.4.151.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–2.

obedient” comprises the scripted part or repertoire of rules that Renaissance women are constrained to enact in lieu of the highly valued masculine competencies (such as integrity, prudence, and constancy) they are believed to lack.

Thus, at the same time that early modern authors profess chastity to be the defining feature of femininity, they avow that women lack the fortitude, constancy, and goodness to be genuinely chaste. The paradox is poignantly evident in John Bodenham’s *Politeuphia*, a compendium of classical and contemporary sententiae. Readers of Bodenham’s book encounter the commonplace “Who findes constancie in a woman findes all things in a woman” on the very same page as the saying “He that trusteth to the love of women, resembleth him that thinks trees wil not leave their leaves in Autumne.”¹⁶ The incoherence is apparent: women are commanded to be faithful when faithful is the one thing they cannot be. “Constancie,” Thomas Nashe remarks, “will sooner inhabite the body of a Camelion, a Tyger or a Wolfe, then the hart of a woman.”¹⁷

The simultaneous necessity and impossibility of female constancy produces some curious effects. In the case of *The Faerie Queene*, for instance, the female character who exemplifies the attribute of chastity spends the majority of the poem dressed in drag, playing the part of a male knight. As Sheila Cavanagh observes, Britomart paradoxically models the quintessentially feminine quality of chastity by suppressing many of her traditionally feminine attributes. Even though Britomart serves as a symbol of ideal womanhood, she can only enact this role from a masculine subject position.¹⁸ The complicated cross-gendering of Britomart’s character suggests that women attain virtue only insofar as they free themselves from the frailties of their sex. Women act chastely, in other words, to the extent that they play a part not properly or naturally their own.

On this count, *The Faerie Queene* implicitly corroborates what a number of early modern antifeminists allege: that a woman can be true to her virginity, her husband, or her marriage only by being false to her nature. For such authors, a chaste woman is always—at some level—an imposter. Nevertheless, these same authors insist upon chastity anyway. By requiring women to evince a virtue they cannot inwardly own, antifeminist discourses place women in an inescapably theatrical position, one that equates female virtue with playacting or dissimulation. For Renaissance women, being chaste is uncannily approximate to being false. Or, as Alexander Niccholes puts it in *A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving* (perhaps speaking truer than he knows): “Good wives are many times so like unto bad, that they are hardly discerned betwixt.”¹⁹

¹⁶ John Bodenham, *Politeuph[ia]: Wits Common wealth* (London: I.R. for Nicholas Ling, 1598), sig. D8r.

¹⁷ Qtd. in Prendergast, *Renaissance Fantasies*, 27.

¹⁸ Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes*, 139–51.

¹⁹ Alexander Niccholes, *A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving* (London: N[icholas] O[kes] for Leonard Becket, 1615), sig. B4v.

Given the interrelation of female chastity and female theatricality in early modern discourses, it comes as no surprise that both figure importantly in what is believed to be the first original English drama to be written by a woman. As Elizabeth Cary explores a Jewish queen's sexual purity in *The Tragedie of Mariam*, she does so by concentrating on questions of performance. Cary's title character explicitly abjures theatricality even as she embraces chastity, creating a fissure in Renaissance discourses on women that threatens to swallow up the antifeminist idea that female chastity is always an act.

Laurie Shannon's superb analysis of Cary's play prepares us to see how profoundly Mariam's approach to virtue unsettles the androcentric orthodoxies of early modern Europe. Shannon points out that Cary's closet drama pits several competing notions of chastity against one another, and among these competing notions Mariam's is most radical. Instead of submitting to her husband, Mariam purports to be pure by professing fidelity to her own private self. She chooses to honor herself over and above Herod, insisting that adherence to her inner truth—and not conformity to her husband's will—must be the measure of a woman's worth. In so doing, Mariam lays claim to the fully realized subjectivity and sovereign self-determination that Renaissance writers reserve for men.²⁰ Reading Cary's tragedy through the lens of Renaissance friendship doctrine, Shannon sees substantial similarities between the self-determination sought by Mariam and the private sovereignty men are said to realize through relationships of real friendship. According to Shannon, Mariam tries to achieve an integral self by modeling herself after men and playing the part of the masculine friend. Yet even as Mariam enacts the role of the perfect friend, she vehemently denies that she is performing any role at all. Of equal importance to Mariam's bid for authentic selfhood is her uncompromising antitheatricalism. It is by renouncing dissimulation that Mariam aspires to authentic virtue.

To be sure, a certain amount of antitheatricality would seem to be inevitable in a play written to be read rather than publicly performed. As a neoclassical closet drama, Cary's is one of a number of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century tragedies that self-consciously distance themselves from the popular stage. Like earlier dramas such as Mary Sidney's *Antonius*, Samuel Daniel's *Cleopatra*, and Fulke Greville's *Mustapha and Abraham*, Cary's *Mariam* presents itself as an elite literary artifact intended for an exclusive readership instead of a large and mixed theatrical audience. The printed text, as Marta Straznicky has shown, deploys a number of printing strategies and marketing devices to signal its detachment from the milieu of the commercial theatre. The typography of the title page, for instance, places emphasis on three words ("TRAGEDIE," "Written," and "learned") that identify the play as a literary achievement rather than a theatrical success.

²⁰ Laurie Shannon, *Sovereign Amity: Figures of Friendship in Shakespearean Contexts* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 54–89. As should be evident, Shannon's work has profoundly influenced my own, shaping not only my thoughts on Cary's play but also my thoughts on the paradox of female chastity.

Meanwhile, the continuous text columns, ornamental page borders, and prominent scene divisions focus attention on the formal elements of layout and composition, over and against the placement or movement of bodies upon a stage. Moreover, most of the scenes simply end with the last spoken line: the absence of stage directions dissuades the reader from imagining actual speakers who have to “Exit” or “Exeunt.” By design, the printed text of Cary’s drama offers an experience that “can be jarring to the reader’s theatrical imagination.”²¹

The antitheatrical impetus of these printing practices is entirely consistent with the drama itself. As Katherine Acheson observes, Cary’s closet drama is largely uninterested in creating the illusion of “stage depth.” The tragedy leaves little room for gesture and action other than speech; it provides few deictics that point to the playing space; and it calls for characters to speak their lines in a declamatory manner at odds with dynamic playmaking. The overall effect, Acheson concludes, is a studied “arch-artificiality.”²²

This “arch-artificiality” acquires especial intensity in the character of Mariam. Mariam is importuned throughout to placate Herod with some politic playacting, yet she refuses time and again. Sohemus, for instance, urges Mariam to feign delight at Herod’s safe return, convinced that the queen could regain her husband’s favor with the merest hint of affection:

Be not impatient, madam, but be mild,
His love to you again will soon be bred.
...
Yet for your issue’s sake more temp’rate be,
The heart by affability is won.²³

Mariam, however, will not budge, even though she is aware that her obstinacy will probably prove fatal. She is certain that she could mollify Herod with flattering looks and false words (“I know I could enchain him with a smile/ And lead him captive with a gentle word”), but she cannot bring herself to do it (3.163–4). Scorning to misrepresent her meaning, Mariam would rather surrender her life than her sincerity.

Because Herod is easily moved by outward shows and dramatic displays, Sohemus’s assessment is accurate: even the slightest dissimulation would be sufficient. The besotted king confesses as much when he says that Mariam could avert disaster with nothing more than a smile: “Yet smile, my dearest Mariam,

²¹ Marta Straznicky, *Privacy, Playreading, and Women’s Closet Drama, 1550–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 56–7.

²² Katherine Acheson, “‘Outrage your face’: Anti-Theatricality and Gender in Early Modern Closet Drama by Women,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 6.3 (January 2001), 1.

²³ Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry*, Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 3.131–2, 149–50. All subsequent citations, supplied parenthetically by act and line number, come from this edition.

do but smile/ And I will all unkind conceits exile" (4.143–4). Mariam, however, rebuffs this invitation with absoluteness: "I cannot frame disguise, nor ever taught/ My face a look dissenting from my thought" (4.145–6). Reversing the rhetoric of antifeminist discourse, Mariam asserts an incapacity—not for truthfulness—but for duplicity.

Fiercely loyal to this ideal of unfeigned truth, Mariam is adamant that her outward semblance reflect her inward state. Thus, when Herod faults her for wearing black vestments on the day of his homecoming, Mariam replies: "I suit my garments to my mind,/ And there no cheerful colours can I find" (4.91–2). Mariam's commitment to transparency similarly constrains her to speak exactly what she feels, regardless of the consequences.²⁴ As Mariam announces at the opening of the play, she habitually speaks out against perceived hypocrisy, even when the transgressor is Caesar himself. Of course, the Roman emperor is not alone in enduring Mariam's censure. According to Sohemus, Mariam never conceals her displeasure, a situation he finds both dangerous and disgraceful:

Oh, that my wish might place
A little temper now about [her] heart:
Unbridled speech is Mariam's worst disgrace,
And will endanger her without desert. (3.181–4)

Unyielding in her antitheatrical sense of honesty, Mariam is the perfect hero for a closet drama intent on opposing itself to the popular stage, where actors accommodate themselves to whatever is popular or profitable.

When Katherine Acheson contemplates the antitheatrical form of *The Tragedie of Mariam*, she speculates that the drama might "deliberately frustrate the anticipated pleasure of theatrical display in order to bring about ... a diversion of desire from the external world of corruption to the inner sanctum of virtue."²⁵ It is just such a diversion that Mariam intends in her own antitheatricality. By repeatedly affirming that her external actions are and must be coherent with her internal condition, Mariam directs the drama inward, simultaneously asserting the existence of her inner truth and proclaiming its primacy in matters of meaning and identity. Although early modern antifeminists question whether women have anything of worth on the inside, Mariam deploys antitheatricalism in such a way as to contest the characterization of woman as morally and spiritually barren. In accordance with the Renaissance maxim that fire drives out fire, Mariam avails herself of one socially conservative discourse (antitheatricalism) in order to combat another (antifeminism).

The antifeminist perspective checked by Mariam's antitheatricalism appears throughout the play, nowhere as prominently as in the misogynous tirade of Constabarus. Just before his execution, Constabarus inveighs against women for

²⁴ Shannon correlates this commitment to candor with the true friend's refusal to flatter. See Shannon, *Sovereign Amity*, 79.

²⁵ Acheson, "Outrage your face," n. 3.

being fickle, foolish, and devilish (4.311–50). In this long execration, he insists upon women's inward depravity, which bars them from being genuinely good. According to Constabarus, the most that can be hoped for a woman is that she be foolish and froward instead of murderous and adulterous—a perspective on womankind that resembles Whateley's vision of a sex so corrupt their faults cannot be eradicated but only temporarily suppressed.

Perplexingly for feminist readers, most of the female characters in the drama validate this darkly antifeminist description. The scheming Salome, the prideful Alexandra, and the vengeful Doris all give life and legitimacy to the sexist stereotypes of Constabarus's speech. Moreover, the Mariam we meet at the beginning of the play seems cut from the same cloth. Even though Constabarus excepts Mariam from his death-day indictment ("You had but one to give you any grace" [4.312]), the queen who appears in Act 1 does not inspire great faith in femininity. When alone, she berates herself for being rash and inconstant. When joined by her mother, she tries to conceal her tears and affect a levity she does not feel. And when accosted by her sister-in-law, she boasts of her royal blood and reviles Salome's baseness. At the outset, Mariam does nothing to dispel the antifeminist association of women with inconstancy, duplicity, and vanity. Indeed, she strengthens these associations inasmuch as she cites her sex as the cause for her shortcomings. Apostrophizing an absent Caesar, she says:

Roman lord,
Excuse too rash a judgment in a woman:
My sex pleads pardon, pardon then afford,
Mistaking is with us but too too common. (1.5–8)

Mariam's imbrication in the play's antifeminist stereotypes culminates in the chorus that concludes the first act. Following Salome's brazen exchange with Constabarus in which she crows "My will shall be to me instead of Law" and in which he rejoinders "Farewell, light creature .../ My prophesying spirit doth foretell/ Thy wavering thoughts do yet but new begin," the Chorus's censure of the "wavering mind" that "wholly dote[s] upon delight" seems to refer to the villainous Salome (1.454, 472–4, 498, 493). In the penultimate stanza, however, this identification is unexpectedly overturned as the Chorus names not Salome but Mariam: "Still Mariam wish'd she from her lord were free,/ For expectation of variety" (1.517–8).²⁶ The abrupt and unforeseen reversal collapses the moral distance between Mariam and Salome, implying that the apparent difference between the "good woman" and the "bad woman" is largely illusory. Even though

²⁶ Weller and Ferguson write: "The Chorus of act 1 runs against the grain of a reader's expectations in a particularly striking way [I]t is almost shocking to discover, in the fifth stanza, that all along the Chorus has been talking about Mariam." Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson, eds., *The Tragedy of Mariam, The Fair Queen of Jewry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 35.

Mariam and Salome appear morally distinct, the Chorus denies that either is constant. Both are women; ergo, both are waverers.

All of this begins to change, however, when Herod returns from Rome. Although word of Herod's survival propels Salome to even greater heights of deception and dissimulation, it drives Miriam in the other direction. The news causes Mariam to confront her own inconstancy and, consequently, steel herself against it:

Oh, now I see I was an hypocrite:
I did this morning for [Herod's] death complain,
And yet do mourn, because he lives, ere night. (3.152–4)

Trying to account for her emotional instability, Mariam likens her mind to a stage on which multiple actors (namely, Hate, Fear, and Scorn) vie for attention:

When I his death believ'd, compassion wrought,
And was the stickler 'twixt my heart and him:
But now the curtain's drawn from off my thought,
Hate doth appear again with visage grim:
And paints the face of Herod in my heart,
In horrid colours with detested look:
Then fear would come, but scorn doth play her part,
And saith that scorn with fear can never brook. (3.155–62)²⁷

Mariam's conceit tellingly associates inconstancy with theatricality, but in the lines that follow, she decisively repudiates both. Mariam hardens her heart against Herod at the same time that she sets herself against dissimulation:

I know I could enchain him with a smile:
And lead him captive with a gentle word,
[Yet] I scorn my look should ever man beguile,
Or other speech than meaning to afford. (3.163–6)

From this point forward, she is resolute. Defying the antifeminist claim that women are histrionic, hypocritical, and variable, Mariam pledges herself to steadfastness and sincerity. Contemptuous of the repertoire of rules that women are supposed to enact in lieu of actual honesty, Mariam commits herself to the real thing. Hence, when Mariam speaks of her honesty, she refers to it as something incontrovertible, inalienable, and all-in-all sufficient:

Oh, what a shelter is mine innocence,
To shield me from the pangs of inward grief:

²⁷ Weller and Ferguson note: "Lines 158–60 present the mind as a kind of stage populated by personified emotions. In line 161 scorn either enters and makes her contribution to the inner drama after fear or takes fear's place and speaks instead of her." See Weller and Ferguson, eds., *The Tragedy of Mariam*, 164, n. 160.

'Gainst all mishaps it is my fair defence,
And to my sorrows yields a large relief.

...

Let my distressèd state unpitied be,
Mine innocence is hope enough for me. (3.171–4, 179–80)

By alleging an inner goodness as efficacious as it is authentic, Mariam counters the belief that women can only simulate honor.

Mariam's antitheatrical attempt to own her own chastity poses a direct challenge to the masculinist presumptions of such characters as Constabarus and the Chorus. The force of this challenge can be felt in the third chorus—the one directly following Mariam's disavowal of dissimulation. The Chorus's smug and censorious sexism, fully evident at the end of the first and second acts, falters at the end of the third, straining beneath the weight of Mariam's bid to be constant. Her antitheatricalism unsettles the Chorus's condescending approach to women, pushing the Chorus into increasing incoherence. The more the men of the Chorus reprove Mariam's refusal to properly perform her chastity, the more they ravel themselves in paradox, oxymoron, and other forms of illogic.

The third chorus begins predictably enough. The officious Jewish elders quickly dismiss Mariam's contention that innocence is enough, imposing in its place an ultra-strict interpretation of female chastity:

'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. (3.215–18)

By insisting that "spotlessness" is inadequate unless corroborated and confirmed by socially visible gestures of submissiveness, the Chorus discounts the private virtue to which Mariam pledges herself. And while the Chorus's requirement that wives be free from "suspicion" as well as "spot" might be said to assign equal weight to the reputation and reality of chastity (requiring both), what we might call "real chastity" fades from view in the stanzas that follow. By the time we reach stanza three, the focus is almost entirely on "fame," "reputation," and "glory":

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. (3.227–32)

"Actual" chastity figures into this discussion only as a parenthetical aside ("yet though most chaste") of limited significance to the Chorus's overall assessment of honesty. Being chaste has little bearing on being reputed chaste.

Integrity's inconsequentiality is implicit in the close. As the third chorus ends, role-playing overtakes reality and performance becomes paramount, so much so that the Chorus preposterously challenges the chastity of those who would appear unimpeachable: women whose minds are "free from thought of ill" and whose thoughts "reflect with purest light":

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 find,
A common body than a common mind.

And every mind, though free from thought of ill,
That out of glory seeks a worth to show,
When any's ears but one therewith they fill,
Doth in a sort her pureness overthrow. (3.241-8)

What sort of "pureness," we might well ask, could a woman possibly overthrow when she is immaculate in body, mind, and thought? Given her inward innocence, her guilt must be entirely superficial. That the Chorus faults her anyway suggests the absurdity of the situation. Driven by their antifeminist zeal, the men of the Chorus push chastity so far as to rupture its ties to actual acts, intentions, and urges. Their final notion of chastity is less an attribute or a quality than the caricature of one. Primarily comprised of simulations and social postures, this form of chastity is a virtual virtue, existing in the collective and hypercritical imagination of a sexist society rather than in the hearts and minds of individual wives.

Even though the third chorus begins by exhorting women to enact their inner virtue so exactly as to dispel all doubts of its existence, it eventually sets aside the presence and pertinence of this inward virtue, focusing instead on chastity's public expressions and social displays. At one level, this change of focus from actual chastity to enacted chastity is indicative of the elevated expectations and heightened scrutiny to which Renaissance women are subject. Wives must not only be chaste, they must also seem chaste. At another level, however, this shift of perspective can be correlated with lower expectations rather than higher ones. In this reading, the Chorus's almost exclusive interest in the repertoire of rules reveals a disregard for women's moral capacity. The Chorus's investment in the performance of chastity over and above the possession of chastity suggests that, where women are concerned, performance might be all there is.

Such a position launches the men of the Chorus into rough ideological seas (not unlike those sailed by early modern antifeminists), where they are tossed about and struggle to stay afloat. The Chorus that oxymoronically refers to the woman who "may with reputation live" even though "she doth her glory blot" and the woman who "wounds her honour" even though she is "most chaste," is clearly taking on water. By the time the third chorus concludes, the ship has pretty well sunk. As Margaret Ferguson observes, the Chorus's final pronouncements cannot be reconciled with its first assertions. In the ultimate stanzas the Chorus asserts the

impermissibility of the very actions identified as “lawful liberties” in the opening stanzas. And while the middle stanzas allow that a woman may be chaste even if she exchanges private words with another man, the concluding stanzas contend that a wife cannot be chaste if her mind is not “peculiar” (3.242).²⁸ Over the course of five short stanzas, the Chorus repeatedly confounds, contradicts, and reverses itself, expressing the incoherence at the heart of antifeminist approaches to female chastity.

Catherine Belsey shows the statements of Sohemus to be similarly confused. As with the Chorus, this confusion manifests itself most clearly in the scenes immediately following Mariam’s decision to do away with dissimulation. In her antitheatricalism, Mariam divorces chastity’s social presentations from its private meanings—and Sohemus gets caught in the divide. Left onstage to lament the queen’s injudiciousness, Sohemus doesn’t know what to make of her (other than an object of pity):

Poor guiltless queen! Oh, that my wish might place
A little temper now about thy heart:
Unbridled speech is Mariam’s worst disgrace,
And will endanger her without desert. (3.181–4)

Depicting Mariam as both guilty and “guiltless,” as both “disgrace[d]” and “without desert,” Sohemus vacillates between contradictory interpretations. In Belsey’s reading, Sohemus’s uncertainty is said to express widespread ambivalence about women’s speech (and this it certainly does), but what makes this ambivalence about female speech so crucial is its connection to the larger question of female chastity.²⁹ Sohemus’s perplexity is produced by his inability to reconcile the play’s competing notions of female chastity. If, as the Chorus contends, women’s chastity is a simulated virtue, dependent upon theatrical displays and social postures, then Mariam is disgracefully unchaste. But if, as Mariam upholds, female chastity is a real attribute, premised upon spiritual integrity and inward innocence, then the queen is wholly “guiltless.”

Mariam’s commitment to the latter conceptualization is so complete that she does not deign to answer when Herod asks what it was that adulterously attracted her to Sohemus: “They can tell/ That say I lov’d him, Mariam says not so.” (4.193–4). Her dismissive reply denies that any external agent has the right to pass judgment on her character. Mariam is not false so long as “Mariam says not so.” The queen affords her husband nothing more than a simple statement of worth, for anything more would implicitly allow that her virtue requires the recognition or ratification of others. By insisting that her honor is not up for debate, Mariam presents her chastity as a private attribute rather than a collective construct, an inner competence instead of an outward role.

²⁸ Margaret W. Ferguson, “Running On with Almost Public Voice: The Case of ‘E.C.’,” *Tradition and the Talents of Women*, Florence Howe, ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 51–2.

²⁹ Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), 173.

At first glance, Mariam's curt reply could be considered the only acceptable response to allegations of adultery. As Marie Loughlin has observed, the early modern conflation of female speech acts with female sex acts hinders maligned women from saying much in their own defense. Any woman opening her mouth to answer her accusers offers proof in her garrulity of the unchastity she intends to deny.³⁰ Mariam's silence, however, signifies something quite different, for it comes in response to her husband's request for private satisfaction. Mariam's silence is not an unfortunate attempt to uphold the feminine ideals of silence and chastity when these ideals conflict. It is an act of direct disobedience. Mariam holds her peace in the one situation where female speech is not merely permissible but imperative.

Graphina is the compliant counterexample. The only character not found in Cary's source text, Graphina seems to have been included specifically to address the issue of female silence. She is, after all, associated with silence five times in less than thirty lines.³¹ Yet while Graphina's silence initially arouses both admiration and ardor in her lover, Pheroras, it begins to perplex him as she persists in it. Before too long, Pheroras is instructing her to speak: "Why speaks thou not, fair creature? Move thy tongue,/ For silence is a signe of discontent" (2.1.41-2). Gratifying her exasperated lover, Graphina immediately opens her mouth and says exactly what Pheroras would like to hear. Her declarations of humility and devotion empty her silence of its subversiveness, but as Margaret Ferguson observes, the episode nevertheless indicates that female silence can be just as expressive—and just as transgressive—as female speech.³²

Thus, while contemporary criticism has made much of Mariam's "promiscuous" public discourse, it is equally important to attend to those instances in which she keeps quiet. Herod may lamely and belatedly gripe that Mariam was willing to open her mouth to every stranger's ear, but loquacity is not the driving force behind her execution as an adulteress (4.434). The direct cause of her death, as both Herod and Mariam observe, is her refusal to conceal her contempt, to bestow on Herod the one gentle word or one fair smile that would be enough to pacify him. Herod cares less that Mariam runs on "with public voice" than that she refrains from running on when he requires it of her. Her muteness is more infuriating than her volubility. At issue is not Mariam's incontinence but, rather, her restraint.

Indeed, it is by cutting off all conjugal conversation that Mariam in some measure convicts herself of the unfaithfulness for which she is eventually executed. This, at least, would be the position of Juan Luis Vives, who characterizes wifely denial as a form of infidelity. Even as Vives extols in *The Instruction* "the goodnes of continence," he warns that any woman who withholds her body from her husband or otherwise frustrates his desire, "commytteth adultery agaynst her

³⁰ Loughlin, *Hymeneutics*, 88.

³¹ Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 169.

³² Ferguson, "Running On with Almost Public Voice," 47.

husbandes wyll."³³ For such a one as Vives, Mariam violates her marital vows and becomes adulterous the moment she forswears her husband's bed.

Mariam, of course, understands the situation differently. Her refusal to perform insincerely—either sexually or verbally—is part of her bid for a private self. She embraces truthfulness in an effort to become what Catherine Belsey terms “a unified, autonomous subject.” Belsey’s reading of the play rightly emphasizes how Mariam’s outspokenness aims at the establishment of an independent self, since each pronouncement attests to the invisible interior from which it proceeds.³⁴ But speech is not the only means of creating or expressing interiority in Cary’s text. As Pheroras indicates in his exchange with the temporarily too-quiet Graphina, silence can also serve as a sign of subjectivity. What is crucial to the founding of a freely determined self is less the means of expression (speech or silence) than the manner of expression (sincerity or insincerity)—and Mariam remains committed to sincerity even when she is not speaking.

As the drama comes to a close, Mariam increasingly distances herself from the garrulity that defines her earlier in the action. She scants Herod’s querulous questions about her alleged affair with Sohemus. She makes no answer to her mother on the way to the scaffold. She opens her mouth to the nuntio only to relinquish her power to speak. And, in her last act of life, she bows her head in inaudible prayer. Mariam’s silence in these final scenes, however, is not a repudiation of the subversiveness she initially expressed in her forthright speech. The outspokenness of the early acts and the silence of the latter acts cohere insofar as each amounts to a rejection of any role that is not in agreement with Mariam’s intents or desires. When Mariam is supposed to play the part of the submissive wife, she speaks out. When Mariam is expected to enact the role of the penitent supplicant, she holds her peace. As much in her silence as in her loquacity, Mariam professes a private self that must be the source and certification of all meaning.

The drama’s depiction of Mariam’s death, replete with Christological allusions and echoes, decisively privileges Mariam’s position.³⁵ By the end of the play, there can be no doubt that Mariam was chaste. The Chorus is convinced. The king is convinced. The reader is convinced. Tellingly, what ultimately establishes Mariam’s chastity is the very thing once taken as evidence of its absence; namely, her refusal to play the part of the chaste wife by putting on the social roles of humility, obedience, and silence. By refusing to simulate her chastity, Mariam finally certifies it. This final certification, of course, does not merely exonerate Mariam; it also collapses the premise that women can only play at virtue. Mariam’s authentic virtue—endorsed by all—assails the idea that women are morally inferior, that they can only approximate chastity and integrity by simulating it through scripted behaviors and postures. In its aggressive antitheatricalism, Cary’s closet drama fundamentally contests early modern antifeminism.

³³ Vives, *Instruction of a Christen Woman*, sig. X1r.

³⁴ Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 173.

³⁵ For a discussion of these Christological allusions, see Beilin, *Redeeming Eve*, 171–2.