EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

Intersecting Discourses of Race and Gender in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*

Evelyn Gajowski

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

shakespe@unlv.nevada.edu

And they had inherited, among other things, a long history of the 'meaning' of color.

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*[1]

Elizabeth Cary's closet drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam: The Fair Queen of Jewry*, is the first dramatic text authored by a female playwright in the English literary tradition.[2] The play dramatizes the conflicts that characterize two marriages: Mariam and Herod, and Salome and Constabarus. Indeed, 'marriage is the battlefield of the play', as Elaine Beilin puts it.[3] Not surprisingly, initial critical attention to Cary's tragedy comparatively analyses the marital conflicts characterizing Cary's marriage, drawing on *The Lady Falkland: Her Life*, a biography written by one of her daughters, on the one hand, and the marital conflicts characterizing Mariam's marriage to Herod within the imaginative world of the dramatic text, on the other. Early critical attention also comparatively analyses

---

[1] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 49.

[2] If we were to consider Mary Sidney's closet drama, *The Tragedy of Antony*, as a dramatic text in its own right rather than merely a translation of Robert Garnier's sixteenth-century text from the French, then Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* would be the second dramatic text authored by a female playwright in the English literary tradition.

[3] Elaine Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 167.

Cary's dramatic text and her source, Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*, translated into English by Thomas Lodge and published in 1602. Cary drew upon Josephus freely, but she makes two major alterations in the story that she inherits: the first is the addition of her Christian perspective, as Beilin points out, while the second is her focus on the character of Mariam as her tragic protagonist.[4] What I aim to interrogate here is Cary's juxtaposition of two antithetical representations of femininity – Mariam, her tragic protagonist, and Salome, her villain – to structure her dramatic text. While Salome dominates the first half, Mariam dominates the second half. I aim, further, to examine Cary's skilful exploitation of early modern European discourses of race and gender in establishing the identity formation of these two female characters.

European Discourses of Race

'Europe is both a region and an idea', as Robert Bartlett points out in *The Making of Europe*.[5] And ideas of 'Europeanness' have long been entangled in discourses of racial, ethnic, national, religious, and geographic difference – in literature, as in history. Indeed, these various discourses have contributed to 'Europe' as a construct, or the

---

[4] Ibid, pp. 165-6. Other scholarly and critical studies of Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* include, in chronological order, the following: Elaine Beilin, 'Elizabeth Cary and *The Tragedie of Mariam*', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 16 (1980), 45-64; Sandra Fischer, 'Elizabeth Cary and Tyranny, Domestic and Religious', in *Silent But for the Word*: *Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*, ed. by Margaret P. Hannay (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1985), pp. 225-37; Margaret W. Ferguson, 'A Room Not Their Own: Renaissance Women as Readers and Writers', in *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, ed. by Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 93-116; Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson, Introduction, in *The Tragedy of Mariam: The Fair Queen of Jewry,* ed. by Weller and Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 1-59; Dympna Callaghan, 'Re-reading Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedie of Mariam, Faire Queene of Jewry*', in *Women, 'Race', and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 163-77; Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Carolyn E. Brown, '*The Tragedy of Mariam*'s Politics', Paper presented at the Shakespeare Assn. of America Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA, 1999; Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, Introduction, *The Tragedy of Mariam: The Fair Queen of Jewry*, ed. by Hodgson-Wright (Peterborough: Broadview, 2000), pp. 1-37; Lisa Hopkins, *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Joyce Green MacDonald, *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). My analysis of Cary's *Mariam* is indebted to, and hopes to build upon, the work of these scholars and critics.

[5] Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change, 950-1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 1.

'Europeanization of Europe' in the premodern era, as Lisa Lampert puts it.[6] Historians and literary scholars have disagreed, however, about the origins of racial discourse in Europe. On the one hand, historians such as Bartlett make an argument for a medieval period that was 'pre-racial', asserting that 'race' was akin to twenty-first century conceptions of 'ethnicity'. Literary scholars such as Jeffrey Cohen, on the other hand, disagree, asserting that racial difference played a significant role in the construction of premodern European identity.[7]

Geraldine Heng and Lisa Lampert also challenge the view that medieval Europe was 'pre-racial'. According to Heng, the discourse that established 'the normativity of whiteness' (and, by implication, the deviance of 'blackness') is evident as early as the Middle English romance, *The King of Tars* (c. 1330), which, coincidentally, celebrates the power of Christianity.[8] Lampert traces cultural constructions of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' to the early thirteenth-century German romance, *Parzival*, by Wolfram von Eschenbach, in addition to *The King of Tars.* Both romances illuminate 'the tangled relationships' between 'theological' and 'biological' notions of race, she argues, in the premodern era, as well as the modern era.[9] The racial stereotypes with which we are familiar at the outset of the twenty-first century – the association of 'whiteness' with goodness, purity, and innocence, on the one hand, and the association of 'blackness' with evil, sin, and guilt, on the other – were present in premodern Europe. These medieval romances construct 'whiteness' as normative and European, and, further, initiate the construction of the binary of a European 'self' and a non-European 'other'. More recently, Lynn Ramey agrees that the word 'race' had different denotations and connotations in the premodern era than it does in the twenty-first century, but she also argues that this disparity is worthy of analysis.[10]

While Greek and Roman writers describe racial and character difference, according to Cohen, they do not equate 'blackness' with inferiority. He argues that it was the early Christian writers – Albertus Magnus, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, Gregory the Great, Paulinus of Nola – who initiated the association of 'whiteness' with goodness, on the one

---

[6] Lisa Lampert, 'Race, Periodicity, and the (Neo-) Middle Ages', *Modern Language Quarterly,* 65 (2004), 391-421 (p. 392).

[7] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31 (2001), 113-46.

[8] Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[9] Lampert, p. 393.

[10] Lynn T. Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014).

hand, and the association of 'blackness' with evil, on the other. The early Christian writers thereby effectively initiate racial difference, with its various connotations and denotations, as we know it, stereotypically, today. This development occurs, in particular, with Christian constructions of the 'blackness' of the Saracen, whose 'dark skin and diabolical racial physiognomy' were, as Cohen puts it, 'the most familiar, the most exorbitant embodiment of racial alterity'. Strictly speaking, 'the Christian body did not have a race', he notes, because 'the body of the other always carried that burden on its behalf.[11] Ramey, too, traces evidence of colour prejudice and anti-black sentiments to the founders of the Christian church, specifically Paul and Origen. According to the Christian, and, specifically, Roman Catholic formulation, 'blackness' became equated with sinfulness, demons, and devils.[12]

Within the context of early modern literary scholarship, Ania Loomba challenges the arguments of scholars who assert that race issues cannot be analysed in early modern Europe because the concept of race did not exist. The association of 'whiteness' with goodness and 'blackness' with evil derived, in part, from a Bible-centred conception of the world according to which 'humanity was graded according to its geographical distance from the Holy Land', as Loomba points out; 'hence black people were devilish because they existed outside both the physical and the conceptual realm of Christianity'.[13] In early modern England, 'whiteness' was seen as primary – the default or the norm – as Arthur Little argues, while 'blackness' signified 'some later horror, a kind of accident or aberration, a kind of jungle infestation'.[14] Throughout the development of these fluctuating ideas about 'Europeanness', 'whiteness' came to be construed as 'European', while 'blackness' came to be construed as 'non-European'.

European Discourses of Gender

Romantic love as a structure of thought in the Western tradition was invented by troubadours such as Giraut de Borneilh in the south of France in the twelfth century. When the lord of the manor was called away from home to fight in the Crusades, the lady presided over the manor in his stead. Itinerant troubadours and minstrels literally sang for their supper, having everything to gain – a meal and a place to sleep – by praising the

---

[11] Cohen, p. 114 and p. 116.

[12] Ramey, pp. 25-38.

[13] Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 42.

[14] Arthur L. Little, Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 77.

lady of the manor. The power paradigm of the worshipful male and the worshipped female that developed in the material realm, moreover, was reinforced in the realm of religion with the worship of the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholic cathedrals and churches. Male discourse that eventually came to be called Petrarchan discourse constructed females as love objects, rhetorically idealizing them, and placing them, figuratively, on a pedestal above the male speaker, persona, or character. Ovidian discourse, on the other hand, constructed females as sex objects, rhetorically denigrating them, and placing them, figuratively, in a position lower than the male speaker, person, or character. A discursive tradition with a lengthier history, it originates in the classical world in texts such as Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*.

The moment in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* when Giovanni enters with Annabella's heart on a poniard marks the most flamboyant, spectacular staging of the *blazon*, or the male anatomization of the female, on the early modern English stage. Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is saturated with Petrarchan moments in which a male character idealizes a female character, constructing her as a love object, on the one hand, and Ovidian moments in which a male character denigrates a female character, constructing her as a sex object, on the other. In Shakespeare's dramatic texts, Romeo's idealization of Juliet is the most famous example of Petrarchan discourse, while Othello's denigration of Desdemona (under the influence of Iago) is the most famous example of Ovidian discourse.[15] And, at times, early modern English drama is punctuated by theatrical moments that stage various components of both discursive traditions, culminating in Ford's spectacle: the rape, silencing, and dismemberment of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*;[16] Romeo's Petrarchan rhetoric and worshipful stance beneath Juliet in the orchard, or balcony, scene (2.2); Orlando's nailing love poems onto the trees in the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*; Olivia's deconstruction of the *blazon* in *Twelfth Night* (1.5); Othello's reference to Desdemona's alabaster skin at the very moment that he

---

[15] In *The Art of Loving: Female Subjectivity and Male Discursive Traditions in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1992), I analyse Shakespeare's dramatization of the conflict between female characters' subjectivity, on the one hand, and male characters' objectification of female characters, on the other – whether through romantic, idealizing discourse (Chapter 2: '*Romeo and Juliet*: Female Subjectivity and the Petrarchan Discursive Tradition', pp. 26-50) or anti-romantic, denigrating discourse (Chapter 3: '*Othello*: Female Subjectivity and the Ovidian Discursive Tradition', pp. 51-85).

[16] In 'Lavinia as 'Blank Page' and the Presence of Feminist Critical Practices', in *Presentist Shakespeares*, ed. by Terence Hawkes and Hugh Grady (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 121-40, I point out that when Demetrius and Chiron not only rape Lavinia but also cut out her tongue and cut off her hands, they 'deconstruct the Petrarchan conventions of the *blazon*, or the male anatomization of the female. They literally take her apart, accomplishing physically that which Petrarchan discourse performs rhetorically' (p. 131).

murders her; Giacomo's masturbatory *blazon* over Innogen's sleeping body in *Cymbeline*;[17] Hermione stepping down from the pedestal in *The Winter's Tale*; the Duchess of Malfi's statement to Antonio, 'This is flesh and blood, sir, / 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb' (1.1.445-7);[18] John Webster's problematization of the character of Vittoria, and 'woman', generally, as *The White Devil*; and the insistence on Mariam's 'whiteness' in *The Tragedy of Mariam.* Integral to the *blazon*, or the anatomization of the female, that Shakespeare and his contemporaries inherit from the Petrarchan discursive tradition is the significance of the colours, white and red. The *blazon* conventionally encodes female skin as lilies, snow, alabaster, or ivory, and female lips as roses, cherries, or rubies.[19] The female's white and red face was relentlessly emblazoned, as Linda Woodbridge points out, white and red evolving into shorthand for a standard of female beauty in various cultures around the globe, as well as across different eras.[20]

The dramatic action of Elizabeth Cary's closet drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, animates the rhetorical references to 'whiteness' that are inherent in the Petrarchan discursive tradition. Despite its status as a closet drama in early modern England, Cary's dramatic text nevertheless plays a crucial role, as a fulcrum of sorts, in the transition that occurs in early modern English poetry and drama around 1600 – from the centuries-long tradition

---

[17] I make this point in 'Sleeping Beauty, or 'What's the matter?': Female Sexual Autonomy, Voyeurism, and Misogyny in *Cymbeline*', in *Re-Visions of Shakespeare: Essays in Honor of Robert Ornstein,* ed. by Evelyn Gajowski (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), pp. 89-107 (pp. 95-7).

[18] John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. by Brian Gibbons, New Mermaids, 4th ed. (London: Methuen, 2001). All quotations of *The Duchess of Malfi* are from this edition.

[19] Early modern English scholars who have analyzed the Petrarchan discursive tradition in greater depth than I have an opportunity to do within the scope of this essay include, in chronological order, the following: Leonard Forster, *The Icy Fire: Five Studies in European Petrarchism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Stephen Minta, *Petrarch and Petrarchism: The English and French Traditions* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1980); Linda Woodbridge, 'Black and White and Red All Over: The Sonnet Mistress among the Ndembu', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 40 (1987), 247-97; Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counter Discourses* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Natasha Distiller, *Desire and Gender in the Sonnet Tradition* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Hall identifies many of the interpenetrating constructions of 'whiteness' with Christianity/purity/beauty, on the one hand, and 'blackness' with non-Christianity/sin/ugliness, on the other, in early modern English poetry, and particularly the sonnet sequences.

[20] See Woodbridge, pp. 247-97.

of the rhetorical *blazon*, on the one hand, to the embodiment of the *blazon* on the Jacobean stage, on the other.[21]

Intersecting Discourses of Race and Gender

One of the remarkable achievements of *The Tragedy of Mariam* is Cary's interpolation of stereotypical discourses of race and gender regarding European identity formation into her dramatic text. That is to say, she exploits conventions of 'whiteness', including its intersectionality with fairness, chastity, and innocence, to construct Mariam's character; in the process, she 'Europeanizes' her. Conversely, she exploits conventions of 'blackness', including its intersectionality with ugliness, sexuality, and guilt, to construct Salome's character; in the process, she 'de-Europeanizes' her.

Cary produces European conventions of race 'as displaced conventions', as Dympna Callaghan observes.[22] Set on the periphery of Europe, or, more precisely, in Palestine – significantly, at the age-old, culturally rich crossroads of three continents – Europe, Asia, and Africa – *The Tragedy of Mariam* nevertheless deploys distinctly European discursive traditions of race and gender to construct its female protagonist and its female villain. The tragedy thereby occupies a position that is simultaneously outside and inside constructs of 'Europeanness'. Geographically, of course, Palestine is located beyond the borders of Europe. Temporally, however, *The Tragedy of Mariam* is set at the juncture of Judeo-

---

[21] In *Dramatic Difference: Gender, Class and Genre in the Early Modern Closet Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), Karen Raber observes that closet drama is 'the only dramatic genre in which women expressed *themselves*' rather than being represented by men (italics hers, p. 14). Further, she notes the new historicist tendency to privilege theatre and performance as political tools to criticize authority from a distance and how this tendency has led to a generational dismissal of closet drama as a valid political form (p. 15). However, Raber argues that closet drama has 'tremendous potential as the locus for an examination of dramatic form' digested and removed from the confining mediation of playing company, actors, and directors (p. 15); that it is a purely *dramatic* form in which writers 'were merely rejecting its outlet on a public stage' (italics hers, p. 16); and, finally, that it is a 'form of *drama*' to be taken seriously so as to 'restore discourses by and about women writers to the discussion of gender and theater' (italics hers, p. 20).

Despite its status as a closet drama in early modern England, at least one production of Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* is available to twenty-first century scholars, teachers, and students: a videotape of the 1995 production by students in the Department of Drama at Royal Holloway College, University of London. Directed by Elizabeth Schafer and featuring Alexia Daniels as Mariam and Lindsay Stewart as Salome, it is accessible online at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOYsjNcG93w>. When analyzing this production in class, students have often expressed surprise that Salome is represented by a white actor.

[22] Callaghan, p. 175.

Christian Biblical narratives, at the intersection of 'the old dispensation', as T.S. Eliot puts it, and the new dispensation.[23] Epistemologically, therefore, Palestine is central to European experience.

Even as racist discourse associates vice with 'blackness', so too does misogynistic discourse associate vice with femininity. It is striking that *The Tragedy of Mariam* represents both – 'blackness' and femininity – in its construction of Salome's character. Both discourses of 'whiteness' – Petrarchan and racist – in turn, play a crucial role in structuring the dramatic action. *The Tragedy of Mariam* deploys both of these associations of 'whiteness' simultaneously to construct gender and race distinctions.

During Herod's absence in Rome in Acts 1-3, female characters vie for power and jockey for position by reading religious, ethnic, and national differences within a 'white'/'black' binary, as Kim Hall observes.[24] And the rivalry between Mariam and Salome is primary in structuring the dramatic action. Competition is explicitly linked to power, and, of course, female beauty is a form of power. As the dramatic action of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* suggests, female beauty possesses the power to change the course of politics. A descendant of David, Mariam possesses beauty that marks her social and racial superiority. The dramatic action of *The Tragedy of Mariam* emphasizes the incomparability of Mariam's beauty. It is 'matchless' (5.1.170), a standard against which other female characters are measured and found wanting.[25] More so than in any other early modern English dramatic text, as Ramona Wray points out, Cary introduces female characters through references to their physical appearance.[26] Mariam's beauty exceeds that of not only Roman matrons but also female figures from the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Esther and Bathsheba) and from Greek literature (e.g., Leda and Venus). In opposition to Roman women, Mariam is constructed as a divine creature more beautiful than even Caesar's Livia. Like Livia, Cleopatra is referred to without being represented on stage – as such, she is an 'absent presence' in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, as Joyce MacDonald puts it.[27] Had Antony had an opportunity to behold Mariam in person (rather than just her

[23] T.S. Eliot, 'The Journey of the Magi', *Collected Poems: 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963).

[24] Hall, p. 184.

[25] Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewry*, ed. by Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). All quotations of *The Tragedy of Mariam* are from this edition.

[26] Ramona Wray, 'The Beauty Contest: Racial Aesthetics, Female Rivalry, and Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*', Women's Writing about Beauty in Early Modern England, Paper presented at the Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting, New York, NY, 29 Mar. 2014.

[27] McDonald, p. 62.

picture), he would have abandoned Cleopatra, as Alexandra, Mariam's mother, claims: 'He would have loved thee, and thee alone, / And left the brown Egyptian clean forsaken' (1.2.189-90). In Alexandra's view, Antony's hypothetical preference of one woman over the other has everything to do with complexion – Mariam's white body, on the one hand, and Cleopatra's dark body, on the other.

Indeed, Cleopatra is, uniquely, Shakespeare's 'African queen'. From the opening lines of his tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*, the Roman characters describe her in terms of her complexion. Philo refers to her 'tawny front' (1.1.6), reducing her to her anatomical female parts that are, moreover, of a complexion different from that of the Roman, European colonizers in the play.[28] Even as Cary represents Salome in terms of her femininity and her dark complexion, so too do the Roman characters in *Antony and Cleopatra* represent Cleopatra in terms of her femininity and her dark complexion. They repeatedly eroticize and exoticize her for her distinctly non-European feminine status, participating in what Edward Said calls *Orientalism*, or the Western construction of the Eastern 'other' in terms of profound ambivalence – alternating fascination and disgust, attraction and repulsion. While the Roman characters represent Cleopatra as the grand courtesan of all time, however, Shakespeare creates something else – a woman who genuinely loves Antony.[29]

While both Lisa Hopkins and Joyce MacDonald comparatively analyze Mariam's 'whiteness' and Cleopatra's 'blackness', I comparatively analyze Mariam's 'whiteness' and Salome's 'blackness'.[30] Salome's dark complexion, like that of the 'absent presence' of Cleopatra, serves as a foil to highlight Mariam's 'white' complexion all the more. Salome is conspicuously dark -- a 'blackamoor', as her own brother, Herod, describes her (4.7.462) – and her complexion is inseparable from not only her 'baser birth' (1.4.233), as Mariam puts it, but also her compromised moral disposition. If Cary organizes a beauty critique around Mariam, she also organizes what Ramona Wray rightly calls an 'anti-beauty critique' around Salome.[31] Indeed, the racist discourse deployed against Salome by both Mariam and Herod serves to push Salome off the human register – she is either

---

[28] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. by John Wilders, Arden 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1995). All quotations of *Antony and Cleopatra* are from this edition.

[29] For my more detailed analysis of Orientalist discourse in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, see Chapter 4: '*Antony and Cleopatra*: Female Subjectivity and Orientalism', in *The Art of Loving: Female Subjectivity and Male Discursive Traditions in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1992), pp. 86-119.

[30] MacDonald, pp. 60-64; Hopkins, pp. 151-68.

[31] Wray (2014).

subhuman, an 'ape' (4.7.460), or superhuman, an 'Ate' (4.7.511), or both, simultaneously, as Herod would have it.

The racist epithets that Mariam and Herod hurl at Salome exemplify the transposition of 'whiteness' from its calcified, clichéd deployment in the Petrarchan discursive tradition to its deployment in racist discourse. Cary's use of complexion to accentuate status, cultural, and religious differences in *The Tragedy of Mariam* is striking, as Kim Hall points out.[32] In their confrontation in Act 1, scene 4, Salome insults Mariam, and Mariam responds with the first of several references to Salome's 'baseness':

Salome:	Your daughter's betters far, I dare maintain,
	Might have rejoic'd to be my brother's wife.
Mariam:	My betters far! Base woman, 'tis untrue,
	You scarce have ever my superiors seen:
	For Mariam's servants were as good as you,
	Before she became to be Judea's queen.

(1.4.221-6)

At her least sympathetic moment in the dramatic action, Mariam goes on to assert her racial and ethnic superiority over Salome, calling her 'parti-Jew', 'parti-Edomite', and 'mongrel':

Though I thy brother's face had never seen,
My birth thy baser birth so far excell'd,
I had to both of you the princess been.
Thou parti-Jew, and parti-Edomite,
Thou mongrel: issu'd from rejected race,
Thy ancestors against the Heavens did fight,
And thou like them wilt heavenly birth disgrace.

(1.4.232-8)

Mariam's references to Salome's baseness and her own royalty are rooted in the story of Esau and Jacob in the Hebrew Bible. Salome is an Edomite, a descendent of Esau, who sold his birth right to his brother, Jacob. Mariam, however, is an Israelite, a descendent of Jacob. Cary represents Mariam's and Salome's confrontation in terms of 'a specifically racialized difference', as Callaghan puts it, between Edomites, those of Esau's lineage,

---

[32] Hall, p. 185.

on the one hand, and Israelites, those of Jacob's lineage, on the other.[33] The impurity and inferiority of Esau's lineage originate in his having married non-Hebrew women. Even though Salome and Herod are practitioners of Judaism, they thereby constitute a continuation of this tainted lineage. By the time the confrontation between Mariam and Salome ends, Mariam rhetorically configures Salome's 'base' status in terms of her moral culpability: 'With thy black acts I'll not pollute my breath' (1.4.1.244). And, in accordance with the imperatives of Senecan tragedy, Mariam's words motivate Salome to take revenge.

From the very outset of the dramatic action, Cary constructs Mariam through the deployment of Petrarchan conventions. Beginning with Cary's subtitle, *The Fair Queen of Jewry*, on the title page of the 1613 edition and continuing throughout the dramatic text, Mariam's body is repeatedly configured in terms of her 'fairness' – which suggests her 'whiteness', as well as her beauty. It is at those moments toward the end of the dramatic action (when Mariam is about to be executed and after she has been executed), however, that Cary uses Petrarchan discourse to describe Mariam. Herod always speaks of Mariam in terms of her appearance, her beauty. In Act 4, scene 7, he attempts to absolve himself of the moral culpability of having ordered Mariam's execution; instead, he blames Salome for having manipulated him to do so. To accomplish this psychological feat, he rhetorically juxtaposes Salome's body, on the one hand, and Mariam's body, on the other. And it is not coincidental that he deploys derogatory, racist language – 'ape', 'sun-burnt blackamoor', 'foul-mouthed Ate', 'black tormentor' – to construct his sister as 'other':

> Yourself are held a goodly creature here,
> Yet so unlike my Mariam in your shape
> That when to her you have approached near,
> Myself hath often ta'en you for an ape.
> And yet you prate of beauty: go your ways,
> You are to her a sun-burnt blackamoor:
> Your paintings cannot equal Mariam's praise
> Her nature is so rich, you are so poor. [...]
> 'Twas you: you foul-mouthed Ate, none but you,
> That did the thought hereof to me impart.
> Hence from my sight, my black tormentor, hence,
> For hadst not thou made Herod unsecure,
> I had not doubted Mariam's innocence,

---

[33] Callaghan, p. 173.

But still had held her in my heart for pure.

<div align="center">(4.7.457-64, 511-16)</div>

Herod simultaneously deploys references to Salome's 'blackness' and impurity to underscore Mariam's 'whiteness' and purity. For him, Mariam's 'whiteness' thereby signifies not only her aesthetic and her racial superiority to Salome, but also her innocence of crime. In so doing, Cary has Herod appropriate European stereotypes regarding colour and morality – constructs that Europeans have used for centuries to distinguish themselves from non-European 'others' challenging or threatening the integrity of Europe's borders, particularly from those peripheral geographical spaces to the east and to the south. Herod increasingly not only idealizes Mariam; he also sanctifies her: 'Her eyes like stars, her forehead like the sky, / She is like Heaven, and must be Heavenly true' (4.7.451-2). Simultaneously, however, he increasingly demonizes Salome. In this way, *The Tragedy of Mariam* is saturated with two intersecting European discourses of race and gender: the de-racialization of sanctified femininity, as Callaghan puts it, and the racialization of demonized femininity. Callaghan's point is well taken. However, I would note that references to Mariam's 'whiteness' do not constitute a 'de-racialization', *per se*. Rather, they are as racialized as are references to Salome's blackness. Far from being invisible, 'the mark of whiteness', as Callaghan notes, 'is vividly apparent'.[34] And nowhere is 'the mark of whiteness' more apparent than in the descriptions of Mariam's body. It is noteworthy that her 'whiteness' is constructed in terms of normative 'Europeanness', while Salome's blackness is constructed in terms of deviant 'non-Europeanness'.

Mariam goes to her death reflecting on the power of her physical beauty. In the end, she realizes that it offers her no salvation:

Am I the Mariam that presum'd so much
And deem'd my face must needs preserve my breath?
Ay, I it was that 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,
And dim an eye whose shine doth most excel,
As soon as one that casts a meaner light.

<div align="center">(4.1.525-32)</div>

---

[34] Ibid, p. 176 and p. 165.

The language with which Mariam greets her execution is infused with Petrarchan references, including references to the conventional colours, white and red. Her speech is redolent of Romeo's description of Juliet's indefatigable beauty, even in the state of what he believes to be her death:

> O my love, my wife!
> Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath,
> Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.
> Thou art not conquered. Beauty's ensign yet
> Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,
> And death's pale flag is not advanced there.
>
> (5.3.91-6)[35]

The poignancy of Romeo's and Juliet's final scene arises, in part, from his near-guess of the truth about Juliet's state – that she is still alive. And it is his contemplation of the power of her physical beauty that enables him to do so. Through Romeo, Shakespeare thereby aestheticizes the death of the female tragic protagonist. The light imagery with which Romeo represents Juliet's beauty from the first moment he spots her at the Capulet feast – 'O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!' (1.5.41) and in the balcony scene – 'But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun' (2.2.44-45) – culminates in the Capulet crypt:

> I'll bury thee in a triumphant grave.
> A grave – O no, a lantern, slaughtered youth,
> For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes
> This vault a feasting presence full of light.
>
> (5.3.83-6)

For Cary, female physical beauty is, in the end, denied its conventional power to influence politics. Indeed, Mariam's tragedy, her early death, is inextricably linked to her physical beauty, as well as her Jewishness, as Wray points out.[36] Cary thereby simultaneously aestheticizes and racializes the death of her tragic protagonist.

---

[35] William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Dympna Callaghan (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003). All quotations of *Romeo and Juliet* are from David Bevington's edition, which Callaghan incorporates into her edition.

[36] Wray (2014).

Whereas Herod echoes Mariam in hurling racist epithets at Salome, his sister, he opposes Salome in a debate about Mariam's complexion. He uses the *blazon* rhetorically to anatomize her body in accordance with the conventions of Petrarchan discourse: 'Her eyes like stars, her forehead like the sky, / She is like Heaven, and must be heavenly true' (4.7.451-52). Salome retaliates by accusing her brother of having succumbed to a fit of raving, 'doting' (4.7.453) Petrarchanism. Were he able to regain his reasonable state of mind, Salome claims, he would instead be capable of seeing Mariam's eyes for what they really are: 'ebon-hued' (4.7.454). And, after all, she drily notes, 'A sable star hath been but seldom seen' (4.7.455) – at once challenging Herod's construction of Mariam's beauty and deconstructing Petrarchan conventions that construct female beauty, more generally.[37] Iago's strategy for ruining Desdemona comes to mind: 'So will I turn her virtue into pitch, / And out of her own goodness make her the net / That shall enmesh them all' (2.3.334-6).[38] Salome is capable of converting the 'whiteness', or the innocence, of her enemy, Mariam, into pitch with the worst of the villains in early modern English drama – whether on the public stage or in closet drama.

In the end, not unlike historical and fictional monarchs who order executions, Herod expresses immediate and total remorse. In so doing, he combines the 'whiteness' trope of the Petrarchan discursive tradition with the 'whiteness' trope of Mariam's innocence. 'Whiteness' thereby takes on the rhetorical burden of a complicated double duty. Herod configures Mariam's innocence of crime in terms of the 'whiteness' of her complexion:

> She's dead, hell take her murderers, she was fair,
> Oh, what a white hand she had, it was so white,
> It did the whiteness of the snow impair:
> I never more shall see so sweet a sight.
>
> (5.1.149-52)

And, when Herod recounts his order of execution – 'My word, though not my sword, made Mariam bleed' (5.1.189) – his reference to Mariam's blood serves to accentuate her innocence in a grotesque inversion of the white and red colour scheme of Petrarchan convention. Although violence occurs off stage, in accordance with Senecan convention, the blood of the female martyr is, rhetorically, present on stage. Ironically, according to

---

[37] But see Woodbridge, who points out that the colour black (in reference to the eyes, in particular) plays a role that is nearly as significant in the Petrarchan *blazon* as do the colours white and red. The most famous example of 'black' eyes in early modern English history is Anne Boleyn, as Hopkins notes, p. 163.

[38] William Shakespeare, *Othello: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Kim F. Hall (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007). All quotations of *Othello* are from David Bevington's edition, which Hall incorporates into her edition.

Herod's final musings, had Mariam been less 'white' and more 'black' – that is, less fair and more ugly – she thereby would have been more chaste and less adulterous. In other words, she would have lived:

> If she had been like an Egyptian black
> And not so fair, she had been longer liv'd.
> Her overflow of beauty turned back,
> And drown'd the spring from whence it was deriv'd.
> Her heav'nly beauty 'twas that made me think
> That it with chastity could never dwell.
>
> <div align="right">(5.1.239-44)</div>

And yet we know the tragic fate of the most famous 'black' 'Egyptian' of them all -- Cleopatra.[39] According to Herod's logic, Mariam's beauty -- which he construes as synonymous with her 'whiteness', her fairness -- contributes to her guilt of adultery, resulting in her execution. Here, Herod articulates the premise of centuries of misogynistic discourse in late medieval and early modern culture and literature that Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* deconstructs: beauty and chastity are inevitably mutually exclusive female traits. If a woman is beautiful, she cannot be chaste; if a woman is chaste, she cannot be beautiful.

Coda: *Mariam* and *Othello*

The dramatic action of *The Tragedy of Mariam* resonates on many levels with the dramatic action of *Othello*. When we juxtapose the two dramatic texts, it is evident that Salome's role is immensely complex, combining aspects of the roles of Othello, Emilia, and Iago. Like Othello, Salome is repeatedly configured in terms of her 'blackness'. Like Emilia, Salome speaks the most feminist, or proto-feminist, lines in the dramatic text. She

---

[39] For an in-depth comparative analysis of dramatic representations of Cleopatra by Mary Sidney, Samuel Daniel, and William Shakespeare, see Katherine Baker, *Cleopatra: Three Visions: An Analysis of Three Early Modern Plays about Cleopatra* (Saarbrucken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2009). In *The Tragedy of Antony* (1592), Sidney 'whitewashes' Cleopatra, as Baker puts it, deploying the conventions of the Petrarchan discursive tradition to represent, e.g., her skin as alabaster and her hair as golden filigree (not unlike Cary's representation of Mariam) while simultaneously stressing her self-estimation as wife and mother. In *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* (1594), Daniel ignores the issue of Cleopatra's race, underscoring her repentance for her sexual behavior. In *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), Shakespeare, uniquely among the three dramatists, represents Cleopatra as an 'African queen', emphasizing race as an integral component of not only her status as colonized 'other' but also her 'infinite variety' (2.2.246).

objects to, and challenges, the Jewish law that constructs divorce as an exclusively masculine privilege: 'I'll be the custom-breaker: and begin / To show my sex the way to freedom's door' (1.4.309-10). These lines and this stance resonate with Emilia's attack on the double standard in *Othello*'s willow-song scene:

> Let husbands know
> That wives have sense like them. They see, and smell,
> And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
> As husbands have. What is it that they do
> When they change us for others? Is it sport?
> I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
> I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
> It is so, too. And have not we affections,
> Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
> Then let them use us well, else let them know
> The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

(4.3.91-101)

However, far from being ignorant of Iago's plot to undo Desdemona and thereby to undo Othello – as is Emilia – Salome assumes the role of villain herself, manipulating Herod to execute Mariam. Emilia puzzles us with her conflicting roles of loyal servant to the female protagonist, Desdemona, on the one hand, and wife of the villain, Iago, on the other. Likewise, Salome challenges us, located in the twenty-first century as we are, with her conflicting roles of feminist, or proto-feminist, divorcee, on the one hand, and villain, on the other.

In Elizabeth Cary's dramatization of the moral conflict between antithetical constructions of femininity, significantly, *The Tragedy of Mariam* simultaneously insists upon, in complicated ways, associating the colour 'white' with its protagonist, Mariam, and the colour 'black' with its antagonist, Salome. As I have mentioned, Cary sets her closet drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, in Palestine, at the crossroads of the European, African, and Asian continents. Yet she 'Europeanizes' her female protagonist, Mariam, to manipulate audience members and readers to identify, or sympathize, with her. Conversely, she 'de-Europeanizes' her female villain, Salome, to manipulate audience members and readers *not* to identify, or sympathize, with her. Cary thereby simultaneously exploits the evolving, fluid associations of race inherent in the binary construction of distinctly 'European' and 'non-European' identity formation and marshals them to her unique dramatic purposes. Despite her 'whiteness', Mariam ends up dead. Despite her 'blackness', Salome ends up alive. As in *Othello*, the denouement of

the dramatic action of *The Tragedy of Mariam* insists that while the female protagonist is a martyr, the antagonist is a survivor.[40] Cary interrogates – and unsettles – paradigms of 'whiteness' and paradigms of 'blackness' that early modern English drama inherits from classical and medieval discursive traditions of race and gender.

---

[40] Elaine Beilin initiates the reading of Mariam as a Christ figure, arguing for the significance of Cary's multiple allusions to Christ in Act 5 (1980 and 1987). Lisa Hopkins and other contemporary scholars and critics often follow Beilin in this regard. Whether or not we view Mariam as a Christ figure, it is difficult, nevertheless, to deny her status as a martyr. *The Tragedy of Mariam* resonates with many other early modern English plays (particularly Jacobean tragedies) that dramatize the problem of the articulate, chaste female who subverts early modern English prescriptions for female chastity, silence, obedience, and enclosure within doors (which the Chorus's moral pieties and didacticism, especially at the end of Act 3, perfectly articulate) – and, specifically, the true woman falsely accused of adultery, including Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing, Othello, Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*.