

## Reading with the Author's Sex: A Comparison of Two Seventeenth-Century Texts

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### Abstract

The difference in the writing of men and women is actually a difference in reading their texts. Since men and women have occupied greatly unequal subject positions in history, their texts cannot be read the same way. The same "signifiers" correspond to different "signifieds" in the male and the female text. Thus the sex of the author—or the gender of the speaking voice—should be a point of reference in constructing meaning, contrary to the post-structuralist view that the author-function is a matter of indifference. The comparison between Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedie of Mariam* and Philip Massinger's *The Duke of Milan* illustrates that liberties taken by the male author in language, characterization and dramatic form are outside the range of options for the female author, who is writing in a culture that considered authorship an exclusively male prerogative, confined woman to silence and linked her voicing of ideas in public to sexual promiscuity.

### Περίληψη

Η διαφορά μεταξύ γυναικείας και ανδρικής γραφής είναι τελικά διαφορά στην ανάγνωση του ανδρικού και του γυναικείου κειμένου. Εφόσον ιστορικά οι γυναίκες και οι άνδρες δεν καταλαμβάνουν ίση θέση ως κοινωνικά υποκείμενα, η συγγραφική τους θέση είναι εξίσου άνιση και τα κείμενά τους δεν μπορούν να αναγνωστούν με τον ίδιο τρόπο. Ίδια "σημαίνοντα" αντιστοιχούν σε διαφορετικά "σημαινόμενα". Επομένως το φύλο του/της συγγραφέα θα πρέπει να αποτελεί σημείο αναφοράς στην κατασκευή εννοιών από τον αναγνώστη—αντίθετα με την άποψη των μεταδομιστών ότι ο/η ομιλών/ούσα είναι θέμα αδιάφορο. Η σύγκριση μεταξύ των έργων της Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedie of Mariam*, και του Philip Massinger, *The Duke of Milan*, δείχνει ότι οι ελευθερίες τις οποίες παίρνει ο άνδρας συγγραφέας σε θέματα γλώσσας, κατασκευής χαρακτήρων και δραματικής μορφής βρίσκονται εκτός της κλίμακας επιλογών για την γυναίκα συγγραφέα, η οποία γράφει σε μια κουλτούρα που θεωρεί την συγγραφικότητα αποκλειστικά ανδρικό προνόμιο, αποσιωπά την γυναίκα, και συσχετίζει την δική της πνευματική φωνή στο δημόσιο χώρο με τη σεξουαλική διαφθορά.

Do women write differently from men, or do they share a common language and style? Does the sex of the author make a difference in our reading of texts, or are we to assume a sexless author who is universally dead? These questions have received much attention within feminist criticism, but the search for answers is still going on.

In a now famous passage in *A Room Of One's Own* Virginia Woolf remarks that in the nineteenth century a woman writer had "no common sentence ready for her use". "A man's sentence", the only one available up to that time, was unsuitable for a woman's sensibility and the things she wanted to write about. Among the nineteenth-century female novelists, Woolf singles out Jane Austen as the only one who "devised" her own sentence and "wrote like a woman" (73). Thus Woolf seems to imply that there is a difference between the way men and women write, but unfortunately she remains enigmatic about what exactly constitutes this difference.

In their recent work, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Gilbert and Gubar dismiss the question of a "woman's sentence" in the grammatical or stylistic sense, interpreting Woolf's phrase as her attempt to revise woman's relation to language and as her desire to envision woman in the position of "overturning ... the sentence-as-decree-or-interdiction," imposed by man (Gilbert and Gubar 230). They support that language as we speak it and write it is not necessarily essentially patriarchal, as it has been thought. It is just language and therefore open to "revision" or "renovation", a process that, in their view, a number of women writers of the last hundred years have experimented with in fantasy. In contrast to their earlier work on nineteenth-century novelists, Gilbert and Gubar read twentieth-century female texts not as expressions of rage on the part of the authors for being excluded or displaced from the literary field but as creative responses to male derisions of "woman talk," as positive action in claiming what is theirs too. Elaine Showalter likewise dismisses the idea of a woman's language as distinct from men's and says that women have always managed to express what she sees as their characteristically female culture through the language of the dominant group. Further she suggests that we read women's texts as a "double-voiced discourse, containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story" (Showalter 34). Showalter leans heavily on cultural anthropology and, like the Gilbert and Gubar of

*The Madwoman in the Attic*, she bases her theory of women's writing on her study of female novelists.

While these feminists correctly reject the idea of a woman's sentence as distinct from a man's, their choice of texts and literary periods, and in the case of Gilbert and Gubar shifts in interpretative strategy, direct us to see that the question of difference in the writing of men and women has to be answered by drawing evidence from all genres and all historical periods. Through a brief comparative study of two early seventeenth-century dramas I want to illustrate that in the case of the early modern period the difference in writing is actually a difference in reading, produced not only by the reader as subject but mainly by relating the text to the author's historically-specific subjectivity. The woman writer's text means something different to those of us who are aware of the unequal subject position occupied by men and women in that particular span of history. The two plays selected for comparison—Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedie of Mariam* (written 1604; published 1613) and Philip Massinger's *The Duke of Milan* (1621-1623?)—dramatize the same story, of Herod and Mariam,<sup>1</sup> and have a common source, the first-century historian, Josephus, translated by Thomas Lodge in 1602. They are, for this reason, especially suitable for a correlation between textual difference and author's sex.

Massinger's *Duke of Milan* is a play for stage performance, written in blank verse, the established metrical form for the theatre at the time. Produced within the great tradition of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, it displays various freedoms—in action, gesture, language, and characterization. It contrasts to Cary's play in these respects. *Mariam* is a Senecan-type closet drama, intended for private reading rather than for staging. Composed in alternately rhyming lines of iambic pentameter, it minimizes action and emphasizes decorum, using a minimum of figurative language. These differences become apparent from the first act of each play. Cary places her heroine alone in the opening scene and gives her an apology to speak in argumentative sentences:

How oft have I with publike voyce runne on?  
 To censure Romes last Hero for deceit:  
 Because he wept when Pompeis life was gone,  
 Yet when he liv'd, hee thought his Name too great.  
 But now I doe recant, and Roman Lord  
 Excuse too rash a judgement in a woman:  
 My Sexe pleads pardon, pardon then afford,

Mistaking is with us, but too too common. (I.i.1-10)

Massinger introduces his Marcellia in a tête-à-tête with her husband, Sforza, at a party given for the celebration of her birthday. The couple compete in demonstrations of affection and vows of devotion. They behave as lovers rather than as husband and wife, causing Sforza's mother, Isabella, to remark: "You still court her./ As if she were your mistress, not your wife" (I.iii.38-39). Sforza proudly acknowledges his sexual desire for his wife in a speech that abounds in sensual images:

Such as are cloy'd with those they have embrac'd  
 May think their wooing done. No night to me,  
 But is a bridal one, where Hymen lights  
 His torches fresh, and new; and those delights,  
 Which are not to be cloth'd in airy sounds,  
 Enjoy'd beget desires as full of heat,  
 And jovial fervour, as when I first tasted  
 Her virgin fruit. (I.iii.42-8)

Marcellia responds with more modestly-phrased expressions of love and devotion but with the bold gesture of kissing her husband in public:

..... Nor have I ever  
 Had other study, but how to appear  
 Worthy your favour; and that my embraces  
 Might yield a fruitful harvest of content,  
 For all your noble travail, in the purchase  
 Of her that's still your servant. By these lips,  
 Which, pardon me, that I presume to kiss.(I.iii.64-9)

Elizabeth Cary does not use this kind of language and gesture for any of her characters, not even for her villainess, Salome, who usually speaks the boldest lines in *Mariam*. The moments of love and happiness, which the original source alludes to and Massinger seductively dramatizes, are treated as background action by Cary.

Differences in the treatment of conjugal conflict, the central theme in both plays, also show that the male playwright takes greater freedoms.

Cary sets up the dramatic situation of her play in favour of her heroine, endorsing Mariam's right to censure her husband's criminal behaviour and to refuse his selfish love.

Even as he enters the play's action, Herod is weighed down with serious charges: to secure himself politically, he has underhandedly murdered Mariam's brother and grandfather, and to gratify his selfish passion, he has given secret command for Mariam's death, if he should die first, while away in Rome. Mariam acquires knowledge of these facts, and so the conflict begins. Herod reserves for himself the right to do as he pleases without being questioned by his wife. When she does question him, he cannot understand why she will not accept his false explanations, especially when they are accompanied by protestations of love: "How oft have I with execration sworne:/ Thou art by me belov'd, by me ador'd./ Yet are my protestations heard with scorne" (IV.iii.1381-3). Mariam refuses to play the role of the docile wife, or to pretend that she does ("I cannot frame disguise," IV.iii.1407), and even withholds her husband's sexual rights on her ("With solemne vowes I have forsworne his Bed," III.iii.1136). Her cold and critical attitude angers Herod, who attributes it to the presence of a lover; he charges her with unfaithfulness and orders her death.

Cary seems to support her heroine's insubordination, at least part of the way, for she presents Mariam, not as the verbally intemperate and scheming wife she finds in her source (Josephus 397-8), but as an independent-minded, chaste, and dignified woman, who cannot accept a monstrous type of love. Though the chorus censures her outspokenness, Sohemus, a sympathetic and creditable character, remarks with admiration: "Ten such [as himself] were better dead then she destroi'd" (III.iii.1207). But near the end of the fourth act, Cary shifts the emphasis in her play and abandons the cause of her heroine. As Mariam is about to face death, Cary puts in her mouth words of self blame:

Had not my selfe against my selfe conspirde,  
 No plot: no adversarie from without  
 Could Herods love from Mariam have retirde,  
 .....  
 Because I thought, and yet but truly thought,  
 That Herods love could not from me be drawne.  
 .....  
 Had I but with humilitie been grac'te,  
 As well as faire I might have prov'd me wise.  
 (IV.viii.1807-34)

The issue here is the loss of Herod's love, as if Mariam had aimed for it and lost it because she did not have enough humility. The dramatic situation has not been allowed to take its course; it has been tilted.

Mariam dies in the end because she has dared to reject the love of a selfish and criminal husband. What is noteworthy is that, for a woman who has been outspoken, Mariam dies silently. Departing from her source, Cary does not include a trial-before-sentencing scene for her heroine and she deprives her of a final speech. Mariam's death is reported in the Senecan mode. So Mariam pays by death for her supposed faults, but Herod lives. The play is a tragedy only for the heroine.

Unlike Cary, Massinger focuses the issues of the conjugal conflict clearly: the breach in the relationship between Marcellia and Sforza is a breach of faith and trust. There are no other crimes that Sforza is charged with. Massinger shows that mutual confidence is necessary for a happy marital relationship and that the wife has the right to rebel when her husband suspects her. Marcellia can excuse anything but jealousy and suspicion in Sforza. Though she turns cold when she learns about her husband's secret command for her death, she is willing to make up with him after she has had time on her own to reconcile "passions that are at war/Within myself" (IV.ii.16-7). But she becomes enraged when she hears that he suspects her of unfaithfulness. What disturbs her most is the suspicion itself, regardless of proof:

Who dares but only think I can be tainted?  
But for him, though almost on certain proof,  
To give it hearing, not belief, deserves  
My hate for ever.

(IV.ii.44-7)

And rather than allay his suspicions, she will feed them. *She* will put him on a test of confidence. She will turn accuser from accused, and she will teach him a lesson: "He shall know/ Suspicion o'erturns what confidence builds" (IV.ii.64-5). But Marcellia, like Mariam, is stubbornly determined not to pay her husband back with the token he deserves. Her chastity is a non-negotiable, fixed asset. "I am yet/Pure and unspotted in my true love to him" (II.i.407-8), she says, echoing Mariam's scorn to love a man other than her husband (*Mariam* I.i.29-30).

Massinger and Cary, then, agree on this: chastity is the prime and uncompromising virtue of the heroine. But unlike Cary, Massinger does not curb his heroine's outspokenness, though he may control the images of her speech. He lets Marcelia express her anger, which reaches absolute rage when her jealous husband treats her with indignity, asking his servants to "drag her hither by the hair/And know no pity" (IV.iii.243-4). Marcelia does not take this treatment patiently, like Mariam. As defiant as Webster's Vittoria, she lashes out against her husband:

Where is this monster,  
This walking tree of jealousy, this dreamer,  
This horned beast that would be? Oh, are you here,  
sir?  
Is it by your commandment or allowance  
I am thus basely us'd? Which of my virtues,  
.....  
Invites this barbarous course? Dare you look on me  
Without a feel of shame? (IV.iii, 262-9)

So Massinger lets Marcelia speak; nor does he criticise her for the use of her tongue, as Cary criticises Mariam for her "unbridled speech" (*Mariam* III.iii.1186). And what of Sforza, the tragic hero? Massinger is not merciful to him. Sforza dies in the end, "Like one/ That learns to know in death what punishment/ Waits on the breach of faith" (V.ii. 244-5). He does not commit suicide, like Shakespeare's Othello; he is poisoned by the villain Francisco, but he dies and so, unlike Cary's Herod, he pays for his sins.

In *Mariam* there is much hostility and bickering among the women. Herod's sister, Salome, his ex-wife, Doris, and Mariam's mother, Alexandra, hustle and bustle throughout the play, scheming against Mariam, or simply railing at her. Cary is not generally sympathetic towards these women, though she occasionally leans to their side as she presents their grievances convincingly. In *The Duke of Milan* negative feelings among the women are also present, but positive ones are equally noticeable. The Duke's mother (and it is his mother, not his wife's) experiences guilt and regret for her share in Marcelia's ruin, and Eugenia, Sforza's ex-mistress, confesses that though she holds grudges against Sforza, she liked Marcelia. Also, much of the intrigue attributed to Salome by Cary (and by Josephus) is loaded onto the villain Francisco by Massinger.

Indeed, Massinger is overall more sympathetic towards women than Cary appears to be.

What do these differences mean? In answering this question it would be impossible to ignore the historical context, and the sex of the author. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries women were not supposed to be writing plays, or any kind of literature for that matter, because authorship was a male prerogative. Only a man was supposed to have the intellectual capability and power to be an "auctor." Also, writing was associated with public self-display and hence, in a woman's case, with sexuality. A woman who showed her intellectual talents in public by publishing her work was sexually suspect. She was thought to be seeking men's attention or to be trying to prove that she was intellectually their equal or superior. This attitude towards women's writing was part of a complex network of restrictions which were imposed by men on women in every aspect of life and which were described with astonishing detail in conduct books and marriage guides. That even a few women ventured to write under such restrictions constitutes evidence that oppressive ideologies are not uniformly inhibitive; there are always points within them which can be advantageously appropriated by the oppressed subject. (See Krontiris, *Oppositional Voices*.) But the fact that in a literarily prolific age fewer than a dozen of women produced literature in comparison with the masses of men indicates the tragic consequences of ideological oppression.

The social stigma attached to a woman who wrote imaginatively about love and marriage relationships was quite strong in the early seventeenth century. How strong exactly it was may be seen from the remark that one English aristocrat, Edward Denny, made to Mary Wroth, niece of Sir Philip Sidney and author of *Urania*, a pastoral romance patterned on her uncle's *Arcadia*. In the battle that broke out between Mary Wroth and this man, he called her a "hermaphrodite" and told her to quit writing "lascivious stories" and to imitate, instead, her aunt, the Countess of Pembroke, who wrote "holy books" (referring to her translation and versification of the Psalms). True, Denny was a conservative man, but the extent of the influence of such men and their ideas may be inferred from the fact that Wroth was forced to remove her book from circulation. Cary's *Mariam* was also removed, despite its partially critical view of women. The significance of its removal is discussed later on. The point I wish to make here is that the suppression of a book is an extremely important fact,



which needs more than incidental mention. It must be related to what is in the text and to what is left out.

Thus in comparing *Mariam* and *The Duke of Milan* we can't simply say that the first play is more conservative than the second and treat them generally as if they were both written by men. Cary and Massinger as speakers within their culture are greatly unequal. This implies that the same fact may mean different things in each text, or that differences in the treatment of similar dramatic elements between the two texts may be due to differences in the author's speaking position. The historical context, that is, cannot be applied in the same way to each. I will try to illustrate this by contextualizing some of the differences and similarities I have alluded to in my discussion of the plays so far.

I noted that Cary chooses to write a type of drama which is for private reading. This choice of form is linked to the author's sex and is actually no choice at all. A closet play is the only type of dramatic work a woman writer can attempt in the early seventeenth century when the world of the theatre at large (not just select performances at court) is associated with loose morals and unrestrained sexuality. Indeed, man's positioning of woman in relation to her sexuality (betraying his fear of it) is crucial especially in the early modern period, as it greatly influences female strategies of expression. For women writers it often determines linguistic choices and textual tactics. Cary's characters use a language which is relatively free from sexual suggestion. This fact cannot be disconnected from the author's sex, as it may be a response to the rules of feminine propriety. It has therefore a different meaning in the work of Elizabeth Cary than it does in that of a male writer such as Robert Garnier, a French contemporary, or near contemporary, who also uses highly formalized and purified language and whose closet play *Marc-Antoine* was translated into English and published by the Countess of Pembroke in 1595. Garnier's linguistic and stylistic purification is a reaction to the decadence and the corruption he perceived in French high society.

The use of rhyme, as opposed to the more flexible blank verse, and the tendency to stick to a predominantly literal language may be seen as strategies of containment that are also linked to the author's sex. Metaphors, similes and other linguistic tropes are pregnant with images that spread in all directions. The limited use of such language may be a way of restraining associative meaning. Likewise, imposing rhyme is a way of setting parameters to written expression, formalizing

it, removing it from the excess of everyday speech. Thus without necessarily intending it, Cary employs linguistic and dramatic forms which are appropriate to her sex and not essentially different from those of Massinger or of other men writers.

The difference in the treatment of the central dramatic conflict by the two playwrights further suggests that in Cary's case some things may have to be interpreted as enabling writing strategies. The conflict between husband and wife in each play is set up at the expense of the man (Herod, in the one case, Sforza in the other). Massinger attributes one major flaw or sin to Sforza (his command for Marcellia's death) and he makes him aware of how monstrously selfish it is. Cary includes the death command but also loads Herod with crimes he has committed against her kin. So Cary sets up Herod as a criminal, with Mariam refusing to participate in a relationship of which he sets the terms. Then Cary shifts the emphasis away from the issues which she herself has posed through her heroine.

It is possible, I think probable, that this shift is an attempt at containment. In Cary's culture the subordination of the woman to the man was an assumed fact, and Cary herself had probably internalized many of the ideas she was brought up with. How could she advocate independence and insubordination in her heroine? Furthermore, the fear of offending a man, especially her new husband (she was just married or about to be married when she wrote *Mariam*), was likely to be an inhibiting factor for the young author. The suppression of her book discloses that such fear was grounded in reality. As I mentioned earlier, the book was removed from circulation shortly after it was published. We do not know what exactly led to its removal. The daughter purported to have written a biography of her mother states that the play was published without her mother's permission, but there seems to be nothing surreptitious about its entry in the Stationer's Register. In the absence of firm evidence it is reasonable to assume that the fate of *Mariam* had something to do with its contents. Though in an overall comparison with Massinger's play Cary's appears more lenient towards men, *Mariam* remains an ambivalent text, as I have suggested. There is admiration as well as criticism for the independent-minded heroine, and the dramatic situation is in her favour. In any case, what cannot be denied is that the play deals with a tyrannical and jealous husband who is challenged by his wife. Its publication may therefore have annoyed the author's

husband, Henry Cary, a conservative man, who was likely to take offence at such things, especially at a critical point in his career. (He was then seeking a position in the court of James I.) The biographical information I cite here is not incidental but has to do both with the author's position as a woman at that historical juncture (a wife was supposed to obey and please her husband) and also with Cary's own development as a woman with a feminine consciousness. (In her later life and work she is more assertive and more understanding of women—Krontiris, "Style and Gender" 146-9.)

Thus Cary's negative or ambivalent attitude toward women in *Mariam* may be interpreted as the absence as yet of a feminine awareness while Massinger's positive attitude may be a sign of his liberalism or of his exploiting the new female image in Jacobean drama. By the time Massinger produced the *Duke of Milan* and his other plays (c. 1617-1632), the portrayal of women on the stage had changed to the better (Woodbridge 249-63).

Perhaps the best example of how the same facts may signify different things in a male and a female text is the common emphasis on chastity. That both texts should emphasize this feminine virtue is not unusual. After all, chastity, both in the form of marital faithfulness and premarital virginity, was of great importance to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and Renaissance literature reiterates this idea. But here, again, the function of chastity within the text seems to be linked to the author's sex. It has been argued convincingly by Ira Clark that Massinger consistently presents female characters in a framework of potential reform within the existing personal and social mores, a reform which accords a freer, more active role to women. In this reforming presentation he deploys chastity as a heavy counterweight to the new female role: "he increases the might of women's voices and the independence of their status by increasing the value of their chastity" (Clark 64).

But in Cary's heroine chastity cannot apparently be cashed in for other freedoms as it can in Massinger's *Marcellia*. It is in fact this idea that is stressed in *Mariam*'s last soliloquy: "But I did thinke because I knew me chaste,/One vertue for a woman, might suffice" (IV.viii. 1835-6). *Mariam* is criticised, especially by the chorus, for speaking too much and too openly, yet it is interesting that when she most needs to speak to save her life (just before her death), she is deprived of words. Chastity is not enough to enable *Mariam* to pose as her husband's moral superior. There is a limit, that is, on how

assertive Cary can make Mariam without appearing to support rebellious and loquacious women. Cary cannot jeopardize her heroine's position, nor her own as a writer. The emphasis on chastity, then, is a tactical *option* for Massinger in advocating change in marital relationships, whereas for Cary it is a *necessary* writing strategy, a way of enabling herself to speak, "though a woman." And it could very well be that Mariam's opening speech, her apology for letting her tongue "runne on" in public against a man, represents Cary's own apology for assuming the public voice of the dramatist.

The comparative analysis I have just offered supports that while there is no essential difference between the writing of men and women, their texts cannot be read the same way. The author's sex is a crucial factor, which changes the text's relation to the historical context and thus affects its meaning. This analysis is therefore also an answer to Foucault's question, "what difference does it make who is speaking?" It makes a great deal of difference for precisely the reasons Foucault himself gives: "It [the role of the author] should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies" (Foucault 137). Women, and hence women writers, have historically occupied a subject position different from men's, and our interpretative strategies must reflect this fact. The language of female-written texts may be the same as the language of male-written texts, but it *means different things* when we read it in the context of a specific historical situation and the author's sex.

In summing up, I want to suggest that our textual theories be revised to jive with evidence from textual analyses. This might mean the rejection of certain notions we have borrowed from male-centred theoretical discourses. The Death of the Author, for example, cannot be assumed in the case of the female text, as other feminists, like Miller and Walker, have argued also. Further, I want to stress that our critical methodologies and interpretative strategies should be adjusted to fit a periodization of women's writing.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> *Mariam* and *The Duke of Milan* are two in a long line of Herod and Mariamne plays produced in continental Europe and England from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. Maurice Varena discusses these in his book, *The Tragedies of Herod and Mariamne* (New York, 1940). In addition to the two plays I talk about here, the English Renaissance claims also Markham's and Sampson's *Herod and Antipater* (1620, 1622), which focuses on the political rivalry between the title men, rather than on the Herod-Mariam conflict.

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