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Articles

The Tragedy of Miriam, The Fair Queen of Jewry: The Feminist Sop for Renaissance Drama

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Some years ago a major Midwestern university (which I'll leave nameless) engaged a distinguished British drama critic (whom I'll also leave nameless) to come for a year as guest professor. At his first English department faculty meeting, the syllabus for his course in British Renaissance drama was attacked by the department's feminist contingent for failing to include any works by women. When he explained that he knew of no women dramatist of that period, the religious dramas of Roswitha, a nun thought by some to be English, were suggested. When it was pointed out that Roswitha was actually German, wrote in Latin, and lived in the tenth century, the feminist faithful remained unmollified. The critic soon returned to England, no doubt with amusing tales of the darkest Midwest, but the incident exemplifies the role of the sop, the minimum token demanded by identity groups to acknowledge their legitimacy: *any* drama would do, so long as it was by a woman, aesthetic merit or historical significance not really a criterion.

A few years later an eligible sop did appear in a volume *Renaissance Drama by Women*, edited by S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wayne Davies (1996). The title, however, promised a great deal more than it delivered, for the editors, having assiduously scoured every nook and cranny of Renaissance England, disgorged an ambiguously thin volume of even more ambiguous content. The first "dramatist" (their term) included is Queen Elizabeth, on the basis of a translation of 123 lines from Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus* that may—or may not: the attribution is debatable—be hers. I will say here only that in high school Latin classes I translated much more verse than that without considering myself or being considered by anyone else a "poet." The second entry is also a translation by Mary Sidney, Philip's sister, of a French play, Robert Garnier's *Marc Anthony,* her

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version, the editors acknowledge, "a closet drama . . . meant for private performance to be read aloud in a noble household, rather than a popular drama to be performed on the public stage. . . . Mary Sidney would have opened her reputation to considerable risk by involving herself in public theatre," an admission to note well when evaluating all this volume's contents. The third entry, a masque *Cupid's Banishment*, is not by a woman, but a man, Robert White, included here because it was written for a class of girls to perform (possibly) before James I's queen. So, at the half-way point in the table of contents of *Renaissance Drama by Women* we have yet to encounter a drama by a woman.

Of the remaining three offerings, one—to cavil—having been written by two young sisters during the civil war that deposed Charles I, around 1645, falls outside what is usually considered the Renaissance (try the Baroque), but was, in any case, again intended only for family entertainment. *Love's Victory* of Lady Mary Worth, a niece of Philip Sidney and the most legitimately "literary" of this cohort, having published a prose romance and a sonnet sequence, is nevertheless another closet drama, "intended for dramatic performance within the safe Sidney house . . . . There is no evidence that the play was ever acted." Its dense thicket of contemporary allusions and *drame-a-clef* references preclude its ever becoming canonical, under even the laxest feminist dispensation. Which leaves us, through this process of elimination, with Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Miriam, The Fair Queen of Jewry*, a dramatization of the story, familiar to the readers of Josephus, of King Herod's rash execution of his wife Miriam, misled as he was by the machinations of his sister Salome, and his orgy of grief afterward at what he had done. It comes as no surprise when the two editors of this volume note that four other contemporaneous editions of Cary's play have been done or were being done as of their writing, or that both of the most recent and widely used anthologies of Renaissance drama—Norton (2002) and Routledge (2003)—include it, the single play by a woman. The feminists have found their sop, and in the future every course on Renaissance drama will probably have to include it—or else.

The author's sex aside, what are the merits of *The Tragedy of Miriam*? It may reflect the influence of earlier drama, but, obscure, it can have exerted none. Never performed, it played no role in the stage history of its time or any time since. Some works unknown or underappreciated in their own age can be discovered in a later one and alter the image we have of it, like the poetry of Emily Dickenson or *Moby Dick*. But *The Tragedy of Miriam* seems quite unlikely

to revise in any significant way the parameters of Renaissance drama. What, then, of its intrinsic merit? Imagine that it was not the first stageable drama written by an Englishwoman, but the third, or seventh, or one of a whole cache of similar works found in the cobwebby keep of an old castle: primacy off the table, how good is it?

I feel safe in saying it's no masterpiece. A great dramaturgical gem has not lain buried in the detritus of literary history, although it has some strengths. The story is interesting, with Cary transforming the shrewish queen of Josephus into a (more or less) innocent martyr. (Some critics have even seen her as a Christish figure, as some critics will.) The verse is flexible and serviceable, but seldom memorable. It foregrounds the abnormal psychology of extreme situations, a staple of Senecan revenge plays; but the plot, unless one knows in detail the complex history of biblical-era Judea beforehand, proves prolix, exceedingly difficult to follow. There are far too many characters—one keeps going back to the *dramatis personae* to see who was what—not all integrated into the action, certainly not all necessary. There is little dialogue or interplay between characters, but there are many monologues, *long* monologues that make one appreciate all the more the terseness of Cordelia. One edition of *The Tragedy of Miriam* pairs it with *Othello*, another Renaissance drama of a man killing his innocent wife, but to the great disadvantage of Cary's play, only revealing, by the contrast, its ineptness.

One website I found contained several evaluations of the play, all by college women, apparently, who had it assigned in a class. Although the "sampling" is too small to extrapolate much from, all but one had tepid to decidedly cool responses: "the play was underwhelming . . . . Not particularly interesting; despite its brevity I found myself bored." "I found it tedious to read . . . . The play is composed ENTIRELY of lengthy, drawn-out soliloquies." "Supposed to be Kind of a Big Deal. Not that anyone should really feel obligated to read it unless they have to write a paper on it." The lone dissenter from the mini-chorus of reservations declared, "This play was one of my favorite pieces of literature in college," which leads me to the uncharitable conclusion that she should have chosen a school with better syllabi.

Such dismissive evaluations suggests that the pedagogue who assigned the play (unless under duress) did not achieve the results that the feminists flogging it desired, ideological affirmation. The play was rediscovered through "feminist critical intervention and feminist critical perspective has informed readings of

the play," write the editors of the Routledge anthology. These readings propagate, of course, the core theme, essential to feminism, the evil of the patriarchy, embodied here in Herod, who certainly fills the bill and then some: the same Herod who orders the biblical massacre of the innocents. Here is a typical sampling of that criticism: few critics "have addressed the connection between the dismembering and decapitating imagery of the play and the male ideology of womanhood as a sort of dismembering or decapitation of her [women's] subjectivity and agency"—which she, of course, proceeds to redress. But the ultimate irony for these ideological readings is that Herod is not the most evil character in the play; that distinction belongs to his sister Salome (not to be confused with the dancing Salome of Wilde and Strauss). Iago-like, she misleads him into executing his innocent wife for adultery. He acts out of ignorance, she acts out of malice, not only against Miriam, but also toward her husband, Constabarus, whose execution she also contrives. Originally Salome just wants to divorce him, so that she can marry her paramour, an Arabian prince, and makes her case in surprisingly modern idiom:

> Why should such privilege to man be given,
> Or given them, why barred from women then?
> Are men, than women, in greater grace in heaven,
> Or cannot women hate as well as men?
> I'll be the custom-breaker, and begin
> To show my sex the way to freedom's door.

A pair of editors is impressed by this argument: "Even though Salome is condemned for her adulterous behavior . . . she gives a convincing and impassioned plea for the rights of women to divorce their husbands." Adultery is the least of Salome's fell acts, but how bad can a villainess be if she upholds women's right to divorce their inconvenient husbands? This sort of attenuating apology for a "sister" puts me in mind of that instance in an early feminist classic *The Madwoman in the Attic* where grounds are found, if not to excuse, then to revalorize the meddlesome and obnoxious Lady Catherine De Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*—one of Austen's finest creations—because she objects "to entailing estates [away] from the female line," an understandably proto-feminist position. "Opposed to the very basis of patriarchy," write the authors, "the exclusive right of male inheritance, Lady Catherine quite predictably earns

the vilification always allotted by the author to the representatives of matriarchal power." Lady Catherine is, however, a ridiculous figure who holds this view (understandably, as she has only a daughter), not ridiculous *because* she holds it: it's her snobbery about class distinctions that makes her laughable. So Salome's "modern" take on divorce fails in any way to lessen her culpability as a murderess.

Not only is Salome the play's most despicable character, her husband is the noblest. The "crime" for which Constabarus will be executed consists in hiding two innocent boys that Herod wants put to death. Salome betrays him (divorce Senecan style) so that he and the two boys go to the block together; in his on-the-way-to-death speech Constabarus delivers one of the bitterest, most sweeping, most damning denunciations to be found in literature, making Hamlet sound philogynistic and the raving daughter-outcast Lear a kindred spirit. The speech is long and furious, but concludes:

> You are the wreck of order, breach of laws,
> Your best are foolish, forward, murderous, cunning, proud . . . .
> You are to nothing constant but to ill,
> You are with naught but wickedness indued;
> Your loves are set on nothing but your will
> And thus my censure I of you conclude.
> You are the least of goods, the worst of evils,
> Your best are worse than men, your worst than devils'
> This is what marriage to an evil woman can do to a man.

But her husband and the two boys are not Salome's only victims, not even her most important one(s), which is the queen herself, Miriam, whose doom she manipulates with a divisive and iron-willed implacability, tormenting the ever-wavering Herod with false insinuations of his wife's infidelity, until at last he cries, "What, is her heart's composure hardest stone? To what pass are cruel women grown?" Apt questions, but addressed to the wrong person. Having ordered Miriam's execution, Herod will blame Ate, the goddess of evil, for his slaughter of *this* innocent—

> '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 . . . .

But Salome is Ate incarnate and Herod, the putative villain of the piece, is but her pawn, as Othello is Iago's.

We have, then, the savorable irony that *The Tragedy of Miriam, The Fair Queen of Jewry*, which will enter the canon more for ideological than aesthetic reasons, has a woman Iago at its center, as manipulative and malicious as they come. Will feminists want to exculpate her?—"The patriarchy made me do it." Or just admit that evil women exist in the world, same as men? Or even concede that patriarchy, in denying women equal power, prevent them from perpetrating an equal share of evil in the great affairs of the world—limiting their malice more to the home? No very satisfactory ideological message emerges for the faithful who bruit its revival and urge its inclusion.

The sop (to mingle the two meanings of the term) has a very liberal lacing of vinegar.