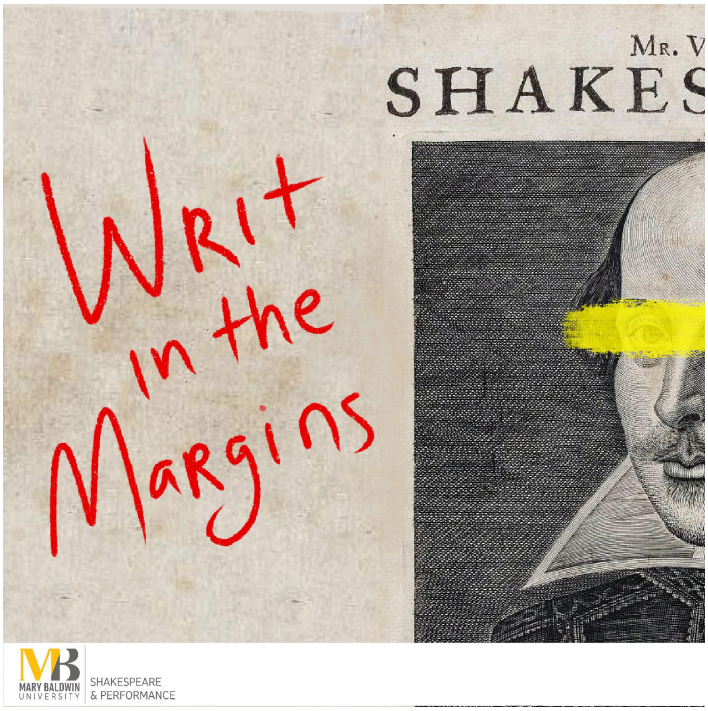

Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University
Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

Episode Guide

Season 3, Episode 3
***Tragedy of Mariam:* How Do Solve a Problem Like *Mariam*?**

Hosts: Ethan Goodmansen, Margaret Levin, and Molly Minter

NOTE: This resource was created for *Writ in the Margins* by students in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University as a final project for graduate students in Prof. Molly E. Seremet's REN670: Dramaturgy class. All recordings and accompanying materials are available for use for educational and entertainment purposes. Please do not duplicate or distribute these materials without permission, however. All opinions stated in episodes are those of the hosts and special guests and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the institutions presenters represent.

A note on content: This episode includes discussions and uses of anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, racist, and misogynistic language in the context of Cary's play.

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Episode Transcript

Molly: We would like to give a content notification for discussions and uses of anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, racist, and misogynistic language.

[Royalty Free Music]

Margaret: Hi!

Ethan: Hello!

Molly: Hey! I'm Molly Minter.

Margaret: I'm Margaret Levin.

Ethan: And I'm Ethan Goodmansen, and we are graduate students from Mary Baldwin University's Shakespeare and Performance program.

Molly: We are excited to speak about Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry.*

Margaret: This early modern closet drama is the first full-length extant play written by a woman. Still, its title has fallen off the syllabi of universities and repertories of theatre companies.

Molly: In our time today, we plan to answer why this is and address the pitfalls of Cary's text and those of her contemporaries we still engage with today.

[Royalty Free Music]

Margaret: Ethan, could you give us a quick overview of the plot?

Ethan: Yes! The play is set in Biblical Judea during King Herod's reign. It starts with the Kingdom in a state of limbo. King Herod is presumed to have been killed in Rome. His absence is a boon to some characters, like Herod's brother Pheroras, who now may marry as he wishes, and a tragedy to others, like Herod's sister Salome. Herod's wife, Queen Mariam, finds herself relieved to be free of her husband's cruelty, yet inexplicably finds herself grief-stricken by his death. Halfway through the play, the high priest Ananell announces that Herod is, in fact, alive and returning to Judea. This news is distressing to all except for Salome, who plans to dispatch Mariam through Herod. Upon Herod's arrival, Salome tricks Herod into thinking that Mariam has attempted to poison him and that while he was away, she had an affair with the servant Sohemus. The play ends with Mariam's beheading and Herod regretting his choice to have her killed. Structurally, each act ends with a commentary from a Chorus that both summarizes and criticizes the actions of the characters.

Molly: When did Cary write *The Tragedy of Mariam*?

Margaret: Elizabeth Cary wrote it between 1603 and 1608 before publishing it in 1613! It is hard to pinpoint its origin year because it existed only in manuscript form before its publication, like many other female playwrights of the era. We know that Cary's source text, the Thomas Lodge translation of Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, had its first edition printed in 1602. This means that Cary had to write her text sometime after that year. Scholars note that 1608 is the final possible year she could have written *Mariam*, as the first of her eleven children was born in 1609.

Ethan: Eleven children? As the eldest of twelve children, I understand - that's a lot of kids. And those are just the children who were born alive and lived into adulthood. That really stuck with me.

Molly: What else struck you about Elizabeth Cary*?*

Margaret: How so many scholars note Elizabeth Cary as a woman of considerable firsts. She was the first English woman to publish and print an original playtext, the first English woman to pen an English history play, the first English woman to publish a translation of a Roman Catholic polemical work, and the first English woman writer to have a biography written about her. Hearing these significant accomplishments makes it hard to wonder how she often slips under the radar. However, Cary was far from perfect.

Ethan: But wouldn't you say that also applies to Cary's contemporaries? Shakespeare, as we're aware, is not flawless by modern ideals, especially in regard to moral and ethical standards.

Molly: That is true. However, in viewing Cary through the lens of "girl-boss feminism," as feminist scholars have through the late twentieth century, we cannot approach *The Tragedy of Mariam* with an unbiased point of view, which can lead to some devastating pitfalls.

Ethan: How should our listeners approach a figure like Cary?

Molly: It is commonplace for scholars to place specific figures on pedestals. Look at how we uphold Shakespeare and reinforce this elitism and idolatry around his works that did not exist during the early modern period but took hold during the Victorian era. This fact goes for Elizabeth Cary, too, as she was a figure whose texts lived beyond the 17th century before becoming an interest to the Victorians, helping to preserve the memory of her life and *Mariam*. If it were not for historians reviving these figures, who knows how or even if we would engage with their texts today. I would exercise caution when one comes across a figure like Cary, as scholars are often lauding their accomplishments and not willing to speak ill or knock them off their perch.

Ethan: What other areas of Cary's life do scholars not discuss?

Margaret: Unfortunately, Cary suffered from episodes of melancholy throughout her life and is said to have died from loneliness and consumption. She had a difficult upbringing and marriage, to say the least.

Molly: What do you mean by that?

Margaret: Cary's mother was harsh to her and her father, which caused tensions in her childhood home. She was forbidden access to books in the evening, a difficult ask for the young girl who loved to read but whose education was purely to improve her eligibility for marriage. Her mother disliked that her father worked for a living and provided for them as a lawyer, viewing it as distasteful. Growing up, it is not hard to imagine their household full of

arguments circulating status and money. When Cary eventually married Sir Henry Cary in October 1602 at 17, the match was purely for political and social gains, not that of a love match. The two had barely spoken before their wedding day, Henry marrying her for her considerable dowry, elevating him into the peerage, and Cary marrying him as it moved her beyond the upper middle class. However, tensions were fraught as Henry was rarely home in the first years of their marriage, money constraints, and because Henry was protestant and Cary was a Roman Catholic. She and Henry eventually separated and began living apart in 1626 over their split in religion, among other things. Many scholars believe that Cary's inspiration for Herod and Mariam in *The Tragedy of Mariam* comes from her parents' relationship and her own marriage.

Molly: What sources did Cary use in adapting *The Tragedy of Mariam?*

Ethan: There are two primary sources that Cary uses as the basis for *The Tragedy of Mariam* - Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*. Josephus was a Jewish/Roman Historian and Military General who wrote in the century after the events of *The Tragedy of Mariam*. For her play, Cary used the English translations of Josephus' writings in Thomas Lodge's 1602 publication, *The Famous and Memorable Works of Josephus*. What is notable about Cary's adaptation of Josephus' writing is she retains much of Josephus' tone and perspective while condensing the events of twenty-eight years into a single day.

Margaret: Discussing *The Tragedy of Mariam* brings up a variety of questions. Some might be uncomfortable initially, but that is the territory that comes with unpacking a problematic play. So, let's dig into the dirtier side of working with this text – and why it receives the treatment it does.

Molly: First of all, why is this play rarely performed? And when it is staged, why is it rarely the actual text – instead produced as a meta-production about Cary's life or leaning on aesthetics and style? Why do theatre companies find it hard to dig into what makes it an issue?

Margaret: Yes – there are issues with this text. We've already touched upon Cary's own life and background and what she is adapting with this work. An early modern English woman of her religious leaning was writing about a place she had never been, in a time that wasn't hers - her ideas, opinions, and experiences do bleed into the text. Therefore, there is Islamaphobia and Anti-Semitism embedded into this play.

Ethan: One, among many, of these examples of 'othering' occurs in Act 4 Scene 7, when King Herod says to Salome "Myself hath often ta'en you for an ape. // And yet you are the prate of beauty! Go your ways. // You are to her a sunburnt blackamoor. // Your paintings cannot equal Mariam's praise…". Herod compares Salmoe to "an ape" and "a sunburnt blackamoor" to degrade her on multiple levels. First, because Salome's complexion is darker than Mariam's from her Jewish and Edomite heritage, he uses names that are synonymous slurs for African to racially other her. Outside of the context of the play, in early modern England and Europe, descriptions of whiteness or lightness are associated with purity, Christianity, and goodness, while descriptions of blackness or darkness are associated with impurity, Islam, and evil. Cary's choice to have Herod use racial darkness to describe Salome acts a shorthand to communicate to her audience that Herod views Salome as less than. Though par for the course during the early modern period, this use of language is still profoundly rasicst and Islamaphobic.

In regards to anti-Semitism embedded in the play, it becomes more nuanced. For example, in Act 1 Scene 3, Mariam says to Salome - "Thou parti-Jew and parti-Edomite, // Thou mongrel, issued from rejected race!" The Edomites, though observers of Judaisim, were biblically considered inferior to Jews because of their past opposition to Israel.

Mariam is discriminating against Salome, who is fully Semitic, Edomites and Jews are both Semitic, because she is not purely Jewish. *The Tragedy of Mariam* is Anti-Semitic less because of the language used against Jews in the play and more by its overtly negative portrayal of Jews in the play by a Christian author for a Christian audience. This, with the play's racistic and Islamaphobic language, makes the play highly problematic for a contemporary audience.

Margaret: And it makes sense, on the surface, that companies don't want to promote these ideals or give them space on stages. That said, we perform problematic art constantly. These plays, primarily written by men from the same period - about places and times that weren't their own.

Molly: Why does *The Tragedy of Mariam* bear the weight of aging poorly? Why does this not happen for other plays like William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*? We take extra care to hire the right actors and stage anti-Semitic tropes delicately when it comes to characters like Shylock, so why would this be any different from Cary's piece?

Margaret: Absolutely. That reminds me of theatre critic Peter Marks's thoughts on investigating Shakespeare's texts during his tenure with the New York Times and the Washington Post. In watering down classical texts or ignoring those for the sake of one's deemed more 'popular' and well-liked, plays that pose challenges take the back burner to meet box office demands. When companies do opt to include the plays within their seasons, they often do not take the necessary precautions or opt to take what they see as "the easy way out" and create a classical "lite," watering down the verse to suit their needs and make their audience feel comfortable. However, Marks discusses that a quest for convenience does not improve some things. In disregarding or cutting the problematic moments within Shakespeare's and his contemporary's plays, we do nothing to serve them.

Ethan: As we have previously discussed within *The Tragedy of Mariam* and *Merchant of Venice*, we can see this in *Measure for Measure*. It is a play that poses a bevy of issues – and yet our class has been structured upon dissecting it. That's the thing – that is work that we should be doing. We should be interrogating it.

Molly: Exactly. It's in the lack of interrogation that companies run into problems, turning the text into a shell of its former self. In doing so, this trend favors ways to tiptoe around the play's problems instead of attacking them as they are.

Margaret: Absolutely. I think it should be said that working with this play in *any* capacity is a complex task. However, in the production history that we have access to, few companies seem okay with acknowledging what makes this text difficult and approaching it head on.

Ethan: For example, take *The Mariam Project,* a celebration of the play's 400th birthday. This was a production staged in 2013, led by Elizabeth Schafer, a Drama and Theatre Studies professor at Royal Holloway, University of London. This production seems to be partially a performance and partially an exhibition, which seeks to "celebrate and research Elizabeth Cary's Tragedy of Mariam by creating a range of performances in different settings to explore the play and bring Cary's work to a wider audience"

This was not a direct production of *The Tragedy of Mariam,* but rather a celebration of Cary's life. It uses some of the text of the original play, but ultimately centers Cary, aligning her with Mariam. It was staged in the church Cary grew up going to – which not only poses these two figures as pure, but also muddles the religious background of the art and the artist. *The Tragedy of Mariam* is about Jewish and Islamic characters, but the backdrop of Christianity, evident in Cary's own life, became another character in this constructed world.

Molly: Another production we looked at was Lazarus Theatre's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, staged in 2013 at the Camden Fringe Festival. Gavin Harrington-Odedra produced this work as less of the narrative structure and more as a "stream of conscience, performed mainly as monologue" Reviews of this work favor bold aesthetic choices, such as a motif built upon red roses. It seems, however, that this focus on the look of the show took away from the ultimate storytelling.

As Camilla Gurtler notes in her review, "Characters' relationships are not built up and explored as much as would have benefitted the piece, and at times we lose the sense of story and drift into admiration of the aesthetics instead". This production amputates much of the script – doing away with all male characters except Herod. Instead of focusing on how the patriarchy oppresses all of the characters in this work, they simply take out the men. This choice complicates the text because it centers the oppressive behavior solely onto one character – and doesn't paint the picture of how patriarchy weaves into the entire society of the show. Though it allows for more attention on the female characters and actors, it does away with the complexity of the characters' situations and just how influential the patriarchy is. Cutting the text this way eliminates moments of nuance and removes the onus of heavily investigating the work.

[Royalty Free Music]

Ethan: We've touched on how patriarchy weaves into Cary's text. Could you speak more about that?

Margaret: Definitely. Cary employs the idea of painting, meaning cosmetics, throughout the play. This language is significant as female characters are rewarded or shamed for their use of make-up. Mariam receives compliments for being a naturally fair beauty. At the same time, Salome faces anti-Semitic and Islamophobic insults for wearing make-up to meet the beauty standards of the world she lives in.

Ethan: That's awful, what a double standard.

Margaret: I completely agree. *The Tragedy of Mariam* features a society in which the rules of beauty are created socially and upheld by the patriarchy. This is a striking, albeit unpleasant, example of how social constructionism can occur within a text. Social constructionism argues that understanding is determined by the world one lives in through establishing social constructs. These constructs become second nature to individuals, so they do not question why they exist or perform these acts daily.

Ethan: How do you see that come up within *Mariam*?

Margaret: Salome sees a need to paint herself to meet the Eurocentric English "look." In this sense, painting assumes a double meaning. The first is applying cosmetics, and the second is falsely representing herself. The term "false" takes on new meaning, as race is not a biological reality but a product of social thought and relationships.

Ethan: Oh wow. Since Cary included the idea of an ideal English look within her text, is it because she has internalized this idea herself?

Margaret: Absolutely. Dr. Kimberly Poitevin, a scholar who specializes in the racialization of cosmetics during the early modern period, discusses the prominent belief by travel writers who believed in the idea of a default

complexion. These authors penned celebrated and well-circulated texts during their time. These opinions fed into the social construct of early modern England, with individuals coming to believe in the existence of a standard skin tone, presuming this to be white. In doing so, women with fairer complexions received further praise, while those with darker complexions were flawed.

Ethan: It sounds like Eurocentrism wasn't the only issue; what about patriarchal issues?

Molly: That's an excellent point. Men in this play dictate beauty standards, and they do so arbitrarily. Women can opt to mobilize their beauty should they wish to, but the men have the option to take away their power to do so at any moment. The women within this text also only understand beauty as a male-created social construct, not questioning the acts they perform. They become "patriarchal women."

Ethan: "Patriarchal women"? Tell me more about that.

Molly: Dr. Lois Tyson defines "patriarchal women" as women "who have internalized the norms and values of the patriarchy." They police both their own beauty and each other's, which reinforces harmful patriarchal principles. Everyone exists under the patriarchy in this way. This is not only an example of social constructionism but the concept of "patriarchal women."

Margaret: To highlight how painting and beauty standards appear in *The Tragedy of Mariam,* we will now feature two close readings of the text. First, Molly will read a cut of Salome's monologue from Act 1, scene 4, and then Ethan and I will read some dialogue between Herod and Salome from Act 4, scene 7. We will then pop-up specific moments from the text. Take it away, Molly.

Molly [Salome]:
Had not my fate been too too contrary,
When I on Constabarus first did gaze,
Silleus had been object to mine eye:
Whose looks and personage must all eyes amaze.
But now, ill-fated Salome, thy tongue
To Constabarus by itself is tied:
And now, except I do the Hebrew wrong,
I cannot be the fair Arabian's bride:
What childish lets are these? Why stand I now
On honorable points? 'Tis long ago
Since shame was written on my tainted brow
And certain 'tis, that shame is honor's foe.
Had I upon my reputation stood,
Had I affected an unspotted life,
Josephus' veins had still been stuffed with blood,
And I to him had lived a sober wife.
Then had I never cast an eye of love
On Constabarus' now detested face,
Then had I kept my thoughts without remove:
And blushed at motion of the least disgrace:

But shame is gone, and honor wiped away,
And impudency on my forehead sits
She bids me work my will without delay,
And for my will I will employ my wits.

Margaret: Thank you for that great reading, Molly.

Ethan: First, looking at Salome's use of her "tainted brow". Not only is this an interesting choice of language, with her use of makeup we pointed out earlier. One of the definitions of tainted, as per the Oxford English Dictionary, is stained, and this would reflect her brow being stained by some product. The act of wearing makeup in early modern England was criticized – this is furthered by another definition of tainted, meaning corrupted, or contaminated.

Molly: Then, regarding the line "shame is gone, and honor wiped away" – Kimberly Poitevin states: "since physical signifiers are supposed to reflect inner states, even "modesty" and "shame"-the essences of female virtue can be applied and removed as easily as paint". Earlier, Salome was speaking about this shame on her brow, which was made up, but because her character is seen as evil, she can dispose of these virtues as easily as washing off makeup.

Margaret: Finally, her use of impudency, which means shamelessness or immodesty, furthers the point just made. After shame washes away easily, her audaciousness sits upon her like foundation. She wears it proudly, even if she is seen as worse for doing so.

Molly: In Act 4 Scene 7, there is this exchange between King Herod and Salome discussing the particulars of Mariam's execution. Take it away, guys.

Ethan [Herod]:
The means! Methinks 'tis hard
To find a means to murder her withal.

Margaret [SALOME]:
Why? Let her be beheaded.

Ethan [HEROD]:
That were well.
Think you that swords are miracles like you?
Her skin will every curtal-ax edge refell,
And then your enterprise you well may rue.

Margaret [SALOME]:
Why, drown her, then.

Ethan [HEROD]:
Indeed, a sweet device.
Why, would not every river turn her course
Rather than do her beauty prejudice.

Margaret [SALOME]:
Then let the fire devour her.

Molly: Incredible job, guys. Okay, so why does it matter to Herod how Mariam is killed?

Ethan: Herod believes that Mariam's fairness will prevent them from being able to kill her. He says that whoever they get to behead her will be unable to because they won't be able to break the beautiful skin of her neck. Or that a quote-unquote "natural murder", like drowning, will be unsuccessful because nature herself will be unable to destroy such a beautiful thing. The fact that the play's plot revolves around Mariam's beauty, or in other words her whiteness, reinforces Cary's Eurocentric standard of beauty, having it stand out and emphasized in a Middle Eastern setting.

Molly: While it is true that Eurocentrism is a problematic aspect of this text, and it dominates the text, this is not something of yesterday. As we have discussed, Eurocentric beauty ideals have long existed, but we are not innocent of this destructive force. We must acknowledge that the beauty industry elevates the ideal "look" as one of a Western, White, cisgender woman; this is not only prized but viewed as a default.

Margaret: In Asian countries, it is common for women to utilize skin-lightening creams and carry umbrellas to protect their complexion. Women in India turned to drug dependence in the form of steroids in an attempt to lighten their skin, as those with darker complexions do not receive the same treatment as their fair-skinned counterparts. Brazillian citizens went under the knife 1.63 million times in 2023 for plastic surgery, nearly as many seeking to receive breast implants as they were eyelid lifts.

Molly: You may be asking why the world continues to perpetuate Eurocentric beauty ideals. Unfortunately, this is because beauty lies in the eye of the beholder... and this beholder is not only a white man who upholds Eurocentric standards but one of the many men who hold executive positions within the beauty industry — nearly 2/3 being men, to be exact. Furthermore, white men have 50% of CEO positions in the top 20 global beauty companies. With this being the case, it is no wonder that patriarchy and beauty go hand-in-hand, even to this day.

Ethan: It's interesting how the beauty standards back then, and upheld today, play so heavily into the casting of this play. Which is the perfect segue into talking about what are the ups and downs of staging this piece today!

Margaret: It's tough! Issues such as anti-semitism, Islamaphobia, and misogyny are highly prevalent, as much today as they were back then. Still, the language in this play is charged, and it's not only hard to hear, as an audience, but also delicate to ask actors, especially if they are cast as they should be, to have to speak it out consistently.

Molly: Absolutely! It also makes casting this play complicated! It's not a play where simply anyone can be cast. Not only are religion and heritage specifically cited for these characters, but also skin color. And as we discussed with painting - certain characters, such as Salome, have to paint themselves because they are not seen as "fair." A company putting on this play has to have specific actors at their disposal.

Ethan: Right! The casting involved must be intentional to reclaim the story. But then again, the same can be said for many shows that are consistently produced… such as some of Shakespeare's shows.

Molly: Mentioning Shakespeare is a great way to bring us back to a point made earlier… other problematic works are staged constantly. Why isn't *The Tragedy of Mariam* given the same treatment?

Margaret: It's a good question to ask! And perhaps not one with a clear-cut answer. But it is interesting to think about how Cary's male contemporaries get away with so much and have looming legacies. If we shied away from problematic text, art would be much less interesting. As uncomfortable as it may be, art often reveals the truth. We don't seem to shy away from their texts… why Cary's?

Ethan: That's particularly interesting to note when Cary has such a history of being heralded as a feminist icon… at least in the early modern English scholarship. And while we don't always agree with that assessment, comparing her work to the treatment of those male contemporaries is rather telling.

Margaret: Wow, that was a great note to end on, if I do say so myself.

Molly: I agree.

Ethan: Thank you!

Molly: We would like to thank you all for listening to our episode of *Writ in the Margins*!

Ethan: I know some of the topics today weren't always comfortable.

Margaret: But, hey, that's what we unpacked, right? Theatre isn't always easy to work with. The early modern canon is full of texts that deal with uncomfortable topics that should be addressed.

Molly: Exactly. Sweeping problems under the rug, ignoring them, or even cutting them does a disservice to the text.

Ethan: However, when you have the appropriate tools and theories to engage a play like *The Tragedy of Mariam*, you can approach the issues head-on, ensuring you don't make the same mistakes other companies have made in the past.

Molly: I'm Molly Minter!

Ethan: I'm Ethan Goodmansen.

Margaret: And I'm Margaret Levin! Thanks for tuning in.

[Royalty Free Music]