SOCIAL CLASS, LITERACY, AND ELIZABETH CARY: THE PARTICIPATION OF SERVANTS IN EARLY MODERN PRIVATE DRAMA

Thesis
Submitted to
The College of Arts and Sciences of the UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree
Master of Arts in English

By
Caitlin K. Moran

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON
Dayton, Ohio
May, 2014
SOCIAL CLASS, LITERACY, AND ELIZABETH CARY: THE PARTICIPATION OF
SERVANTS IN EARLY MODERN PRIVATE DRAMA

Name: Moran, Caitlin K.

APPROVED BY:

_____________________________________
Elizabeth A. Mackay, Ph.D.
Faculty Advisor

_____________________________________
Ari Friedlander, Ph.D.
Faculty Reader

_____________________________________
Margaret M. Strain, Ph.D.
Faculty Reader
ABSTRACT

SOCIAL CLASS, LITERACY, AND ELIZABETH CARY: THE PARTICIPATION OF SERVANTS IN EARLY MODERN PRIVATE DRAMA

Name: Moran, Caitlin K.
University of Dayton

Advisor: Dr. Elizabeth A. Mackay

In this paper, I investigate the possibility of servants participating in early modern dramas and the implications such performances had on class relations of that time. I argue that servants did likely perform in these dramas, using the voices of various characters to create a complex social commentary on the period’s strict social structure. Through a close examination of early modern literacy rates, household politics, and private dramas, I determine that it is likely servants were capable of not only reading, but also performing in private dramas. Then, with a critical reading of Elizabeth Cary’s biography and play, titled The Tragedy of Mariam, I show that early modern women often used private dramas to express their opinions of social and political issues publicly, specifically regarding gender politics. These two main points then allow me to come to my final argument. I conclude that servants might have used characters’ lines to voice their own opinions regarding the constraints of class politics, allowing these servants to speak freely to the upper class that had authority over them.
For my mom, whose constant editing and rambling kept me grounded—not to mention sane— and my dad, whose encouragement was never-ending. This wouldn't have happened if it weren't for you both.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My special thanks are in order to Dr. Elizabeth Mackay, my advisor, for providing the countless hours of editing, revising, and brainstorming, and for helping guide this thesis to completion. The patience and expertise you showed throughout the process will not be forgotten.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Dr. Ari Friedlander and Dr. Margaret Strain. Without your feedback and inquiry regarding my subject matter, my thesis would not be near what it is today.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT...........................................................................................................................................iii

DEDICATION...........................................................................................................................................iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..........................................................................................................................v

I. INTRODUCTION...................................................................................................................................1

II. LITERACY AND EDUCATION IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND.......................................................5

   Defining Literacy in Early Modern England....................................................................................5
   The Influence of Social Order on Education and Reading Practices.................................................7

III. AN OVERVIEW OF EARLY MODERN HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS.............................................13

   Defining the Early Modern Household............................................................................................13
   The Dynamics of Women and Servants in the Household...............................................................14

IV. EARLY MODERN PRIVATE DRAMAS........................................................................................20

V. ELIZABETH CARY, HOUSEHOLD SERVANTS, AND THE TRAGEDY OF MARIAM..................27

   The Life and the Christian Duty of Elizabeth Cary.........................................................................28
   Household Servants and The Tragedy of Mariam..........................................................................31

VI. CONCLUSION....................................................................................................................................41

BIBLIOGRAPHY......................................................................................................................................45
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

For upper class families throughout Europe, one of the most prominent forms of entertainment, especially when at their country estates, were private dramas. Such plays were usually performed within the privacy of the household, whether in a manor or a castle. With the increase in the popularity of private dramas during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the frequency with which they were performed grew as well. The writers of these dramas incorporated their own private knowledge into the action of the play, intricately planning the progression of action throughout the household “theater” and assigning the characters within the plays to various household residents and guests. Country homes of England’s nobility especially became the setting for a diverse collection of drama-related activities, ranging from troupes of professional players performing full-scale dramas to household members and staff performing scripts written by their masters (Straznicky 250). These private dramas provided many writers opportunities to express their own thoughts and ideas regarding society, religion and politics, giving the voiceless—specifically women—a voice.
Previous scholarship on private dramas indicates that before 1660, the involvement of women in public theater was considered unseemly, “fundamentally incompatible with the conception of female virtue as a domestic” (Straznicky 247). The introduction of household drama, in which women had some semblance of power, allowed for greater female involvement; rather than participating only as audience members, women were instead able to gain the position of performers, patrons, and playwrights (250). The participation of women in private dramas broke societal norms, making scholars wonder if it was possible that private dramas could also topple other ideals regarding the strict social class of the early modern period. If women, who were considered of a lesser class than men, were able to become participants in theater, what about male and female household servants, members of society also considered of a lesser class? Could they participate as well? In this paper, I argue that servants may have acted in private dramas, a practice which would have had significant performative and interpretive repercussions.

To interrogate servants’ participation in private dramas, first, I examine the literacy practices of the early modern period. Unlike modern culture where the majority of the population is able to read their native language, many lower class citizens in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not have the ability to read or write. The multifaceted social ladder of wealth and status greatly influenced the degree to which, not to mention type, of literacy a person obtained. Early modern education was supposed to “reinforce the existing social hierarchy” rather than break it, creating a concrete foundation for the social classes, which private dramas attempted to overturn by allowing those without power to voice their opinions.
regarding both social and political expectations (Wheale 51). The meaning of literacy for the early modern period is a particular site of contest among early modern historians and literary critics, depending on the aspects of literacy being studied. Because of the lower social standing of household servants, the majority would have discontinued their education before being taught to write. For servants, therefore, we can define literacy as the ability to read.

Along with literacy, early modern household politics is also crucial to the question of servant participation in early modern private dramas. There was not only a specific hierarchy within society as a whole, but also among the servants within the household. Such an internal structure influenced the education a servant may have received; for example, it could have been more important for a butler to read than a scullery maid. Literacy rates of household servants in the lower ranks would have been considerably inferior to those of the upper ranks. Therefore, upper class servants were more likely to participate in private dramas. Because of the superior education of upper class servants, I use the term, “household servant,” to refer to members of the upper echelon of the serving class, including but not limited to, housemaids, cooks, butlers, and valets. This specific servant class tended to have more power than other servants, commanding those below them and therefore, would have been more likely to have a closer relationship with their masters (Richardson 10). I argue that this more intimate relationship between master and servant, along with their increased literacy, would enable the upper level servants to participate more frequently in private dramas.
To better understand of the politics of an early modern household, and more specifically the relationship between a household servant and his master, I examine the life and work of Elizabeth Cary, author of the closet drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam: the Fair Queen of Jewry*. According to her biography, Cary was an advocate for the education of the lower class, funding a variety of trade schools to educate young children. Her servants were also so well educated that they tutored Cary’s children, showcasing her trust in the servants’ knowledge, while also indicating her efforts to bring her entire household, including her servants, to the Catholic faith. As the foremost primary source examined in this paper, Cary’s play and life illustrate how this master-servant relationship can influence not only the education of a household servant, but also establish the conditions wherein servants might participate in private dramas.

After examining Cary’s interaction with servants and the overall relationship between servants and masters, I argue not only that servants took part in private drama performances, but also suggest the specific types of roles servants may have performed and which servants may have played them. Though other scholars have provided us with information regarding household servants, private dramas, and literacy rates, they have virtually ignored the ways in which servants could have participated in these dramas and how servants could have critically read these plays. In this thesis, I will show the potential extent of household servant participation in private dramas, and its interpretive and social ramifications.
CHAPTER II

LITERACY AND EDUCATION IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

*Defining Literacy in Early Modern England*

For early modern England, concepts of literacy were constantly shifting with the decrees of the upper class or the practices of the lower class, making it difficult for current scholars to pinpoint a single definition. The changing religious beliefs, beginning with Henry VIII's break from the Catholic Church, also influenced the literary practices of the masses. Literacy was encouraged in the publishing of the Great Bible in 1540, which contained a preface mandating that English people of every class read the scriptures, emphasizing the importance of an English reading public. A mere three years later, Henry VIII created a strict law entitled *The Act for the Advancement of True Religion and for the Abolishment of the Contrary*, confining learning to read to only those considered of the elite class (Sanders 1). The Act explicitly states, “No woman or artificers, prentices, journeymen, serving men of the degree of yeomen or under, husbandmen nor laborers, shall read the New Testament in English... and if any spiritual person preach, teach, or maintain any thing contrary to the King’s instructions... he shall be adjudged an heretic” (Great Britain 338). Thus, the Act established reading as an activity for only those
educated upper class male members, emphasizing that both women and members
of the lower class should not read nor preach in public. The restriction of public
reading and preaching encouraged English men and women to turn to the private
sphere to enrich their literacy, allowing the genre of private drama to form. The
publication of the Geneva Bible in 1560 in English changed the ability for the lower
class to read once again, providing those lower classes opportunities to read the
Scriptures in their own vernacular, increasing the likelihood that the members of
the lower class would become literate. Repeated shifts in the legalization of literacy,
though, allowed many people of both upper and lower class to place their literacy
aside, deeming it as unimportant in their daily lives and greatly affecting the literacy
rates of early modern England.

These varied representations of literacy established a variety of competing
languages and symbolic systems that differed depending on the area of the country,
making it difficult for modern historians and critics determine the literacy rate of
the early modern period. As Margaret Ferguson acknowledges, literacy during this
time period is a difficult concept to pinpoint because such concepts “are never stable
entities, never secured forever; on the contrary, they require a constant effort to
create what is supposed to be already there by disciplining both the internal and the
peripheral components of their populations” (32). The lack of what we now know
as a “standard” language affected the interaction between members of different
villages and cities\(^1\). The way one person from a specific area of the country was taught to read—not to mention what this person read—varied greatly from someone from a separate part of the country, constructing diverse vernaculars. Such variety of practices and in vocabulary leads scholars to ask: What is early modern literacy and how might it be defined and measured? And what differences do these definitions and measurements make in any study of literacy?

In order to fully examine the participation of household servants within private dramas, first I define what I mean by literacy. Similar to the definition of early modern literacy, the current definition of literacy is also a complex concept, varying depending on the specific scholar; at its most basic though, modern literacy is defined as the ability to read and write. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on reading literacy in early modern England in all varieties of English dialects, disregarding the ability to write. Additionally, to gain a full understanding of reading practices and education during the early modern period, I examine on the influence of the strict social hierarchy within that time and how it affected the literacy of the lower class.

*The Influence of Social Order on Education and Reading Practices*

Early modern England’s strict hierarchy influenced social expectations and norms by controlling ideas presented to the masses. Because of this, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England decreased power disparities between the upper and

\(^1\)For example, “a transaction as simple as the purchase of eggs between residents of different English shires could be frustrated by lack of a common vocabulary” (Sanders and Ferguson 3).
lower classes through education. During this time period, literacy was power, which was often distributed in measured quantities. Reading allowed people to not only better understand the world within the confines of their house, but also the world to which they may have never been exposed.

The power resulting from lower-class literacy caused a great amount of fear within upper class households. There was a vibrant debate concerning the advantages and disadvantages of teaching household servants how to read. A good literate servant was a godly servant, one able to read and understand God's word and live a godly life, but a servant who was able to read also gained access to a wealth of information that could potentially be used against his or her master (Cressy 9). Many religious officiates, especially Protestants, encouraged teaching everyone how to read, no matter the class, based on the belief that those with access to the written word of the Bible would be better prepared for salvation and a more dutiful servant to God. Literacy was considered a “weapon against the anti-Christ,” a way to battle evil and create a country united by a single religion (3). Despite a number of sermons toting the advantages of being literate, some critics argue that the majority of English citizens were still unable to read during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries².

² According to David Cressy, “more than two-thirds of the men and nine-tenths of the women were so illiterate at the time of the civil war, that they could not even write their own names” (2). It is important to note that Cressy is defining literacy in a different way than this paper does, examining literacy as the ability to write one's
Though scholars disagree on the ways in which we should define and measure literacy, there is a consensus among them about the important role literacy played in improving one’s employment. During the early modern period, literate individuals were not only considered more capable of preparing for salvation in a more thorough fashion, but also preparing for a future vocation. The majority of young people were employed as either apprentices or servants, learning and honing the craft they would eventually make their lifelong profession. Because of the power literacy held, many individuals worked to become literate in order to increase their appeal as a worker. While many people in early modern England looked down upon advancing beyond one’s station, since it challenged the class system, learning to read was one way individuals in the lower class could gain an advantage over others in their rank.

Discipline, practice, and motivation were essential on the road to literacy. Those of the upper class had an advantage in the classroom while those considered part of the lower class usually went to school for a short period of time, if at all. Importantly, the quality of education was significantly based on the class system, which was “designed to reinforce the existing social hierarchy through the training of a devout and efficient clerisy able to service the state apparatus by shaping obedient, god-fearing citizens” (51). The estimated age at which many students began elementary education was six years old; the majority of students ended their education around the age of eight. This two year time span allowed only the most own name, rather than the ability to read, making this quote aptly reflect only his definition of literacy, not this paper’s definition.
rudimentary education in both reading and writing, knowledge that could be easily lost if the child did not continue to practice after leaving school. Moreover, the actual time spent in the classroom was irregular, influenced by the agricultural seasons and household needs (Cressy 29). If the head of the household became sick, a child would more likely than not stay home in order to help with chores; if it was harvest time, the child would miss long stretches of schooling to bring in whatever crop was being harvested.

Learning to read was essentially the recitation of sounds and association of shapes and figures that make up the sounds. It was a key part of education, taught before writing within the curriculum. Through a process of interrogation and response, students built their understanding of the English language, being told to “write” the word out loud, therefore understanding the constituents of spelling and grammar without needing physically to write (Cressy 21). This process was an essential one, not only because it taught young children how to read, but also because it reflected the structure of sermons, creating a give-and-take between teacher and student, while reinforcing the ideals of the Church in a similar manner to catechism.

While the majority of those acquiring literacy did so under the teaching of a schoolmaster, there was also a different “classroom” many children experienced—that of the home. Domestic instruction was considered to be less formal than a grammar school education, but was nonetheless important, since both the upper and lower class experienced this teaching arena. In the domestic sphere, the influence of religion on literacy was seen even more so than in the schoolroom.
Many religious officials believed illiterate children and adults were incapable of being neighborly Christians. A religion-oriented advocate for literacy wrote in The office of Christian parents (1616) that children would become “idle… vile and abject persons, liars, thieves, evil beasts, slow bellies and good for nothing” without the ability to read (quoted in Cressy 4). This viewpoint was common, encouraging children and adults alike to learn to read at home. For those few privileged who did not have household duties to attend to, a home education meant a private tutor instructing them from an early age; for those in the middle- and lower-classes, most children instead would learn from their parents, the households overseeing their apprenticeships, and, especially, their household servants.

Although people assume early modern servants were not well-educated\(^3\), in fact these servants came from a variety of social classes and educational experiences, often times even becoming the primary tutors for their master’s family and other, less educated servants. Servants hired as governesses, tutors, or other educators (a very small minority of servants) and those hired as general servants all participated in the informal and formal spheres of education. Because only the wealthiest households could afford servants who were hired specifically to be teachers, “literate family members including servants taught reading, sometimes writing, and gave religious instruction, which was often formally organized” (Cooper 551). Some servants could be considered literate because they attended grammar schools long enough to learn to read. Other servants, or even sometimes their masters, taught many of those who were not literate. Elizabeth Cary, the author of

\(^3\) A view that modern film, television, and fairy tales consistently support.
*The Tragedy of Mariam*, which I closely examine later in this thesis, is a prime example of a master teaching her servants to read. To gain the degree of literacy they might need for their household duties, many servants were taught using guides written expressly to describe their household duties. Hannah Woolley, specifically, is one author of such guidebooks, penning a number of widely published and reprinted books on household management for the servant class, such as *The Cooks Guide* (1664) and *The Queen-Like Closet* (1670).

With such varying methods of pedagogy and individual ideas on servant education, it is easy to imagine the variety of literacy seen throughout the hierarchy of household servants, ranging from those who likely could not read (i.e., scullery maids, errand boys) to those who needed reading skills in order to accomplish their jobs (i.e., butlers, cooks, housekeepers). This range of literacy is crucial for my argument about servants and closet drama. The literacy—or lack there of—a household servant possessed would influence not only the servants’ ability to participate in the private dramas performed for their masters’ entertainment, but it would also affect the specific roles the servant was capable of playing. For instance, a servant who could not read or whose reading skills were at the most basic level might be assigned a small part with few spoken lines to learn. In comparison, a servant considered higher in the servant hierarchy, and was probably better educated, might receive a more notable role with more spoken parts. The strict social structure within the household is an important factor to consider, especially when examining the participation of servants in private dramas and the relationship between the master and his or her inferiors.
CHAPTER III

AN OVERVIEW OF EARLY MODERN HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS

Defining the Early Modern Household

The early modern period had a strict hierarchy governed society, thereby creating a separation not only between the upper- and lower classes, but also between genders and races. Laws were established to maintain these class divisions, ranging from the intricacies of land ownership to the type of bird a man could hunt with his hawk. Moving above one’s station was nearly impossible, though there are a few notable exceptions including Cardinal Thomas Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell, both of whom became chief advisors for King Henry VIII. Wolsey rose to the highest position of Lord Chancellor even though he was the son of a butcher; Cromwell was merely a solicitor before he entered the king’s favor. The social classes of the early modern era created a gap between the haves and the have-nots, something that was seen not only in the strata of the public sphere, but also in the domestic sphere. Households reflected the “superstructures of society,” taking the class structure and reduplicating it in the privacy of homes, establishing a particular pecking order within every household, making the eldest male the house’s “king” and the other members his inferiors, regardless of the family’s rank.
(Findlay 19). It is the specific structure of household hierarchy, both of the entire household and the servants within the household that is important to this paper.

I use the term “household” to refer to the households of the middle- and upper-classes, which spans from the highest-ranking nobility to the middle class of wealthy merchants. The vast majority of women writers, whether they wrote under their own names or a pseudonym, came mainly from the middle- and upper classes of England’s social hierarchy, because they were most likely to receive an education and have access to the necessary materials (i.e., paper, pens, ink) to physically write. Because of their social status, women of this class would also have greater access to well-furnished libraries in their homes or would collect books themselves. This allowed them to examine important works of writing on which they might model their own works while also allowing them to develop their own reading skills. Moreover, middle- and upper-class women were given control of the household when their husbands were away, creating a social hierarchy within the household all their own. Because Elizabeth Cary, the writer whose work provides the primary focus of this paper, is one of these women, their own experiences and interactions with their household servants are of utmost importance. The better their relationship with the members of the lower class working in their household, the more likely these women were not only to educate their servants, but also to cast them within the private dramas they penned.

*The Dynamics of Women and Servants in the Household*

Each member of the domestic unit, whether a biological family member or a household servant, was under the strict authority of the householder. Much like a
king overseeing his kingdom, the head of household acted as the authoritarian, finalizing decisions and establishing the public face the family put forth. His rule was a paradoxical one, though, for he depended on the other members of the household to survive, specifically his wife. The husband “relied absolutely on the reproductive work of his lady, in terms of biological reproduction of children, the material production of necessities (food and drink) that she managed, and the ideological reproduction of social values in the education of those in her care” (Findlay 19). A husband’s reliance on his wife even extended to outside spaces, including barns, farmlands, and vegetable gardens, along with the activities that took place within these spheres. The lineage of the husband was not able to continue without a wife and the control he had over the production of his entire estate was limited, especially when he was called away for business. It was when the man of the household was absent that the wife’s control and power could truly come to light.

During her husband’s absence, a wife was able to turn the household into a markedly female space, creating a strong authoritative presence similar to the one her husband maintained while at home. The transfer of power created by the absence of the male head of house formed yet another paradox, for “the early modern household was ideally meant to solidify social and gender norms,” with the female taking the typical female role of homemaker, usually producing goods meant strictly for household use (i.e., soap, cloth, food), while the male was the breadwinner, providing monetary security through outside industries (Wall 98). If the male head of household was gone, then the female head had the power to do as
she saw fit, controlling the production of industries, the accounts, and what type of food was cooked. The majority of this authority diminished when the husband returned to the estate with the woman still maintaining some power through her knowledge of healing ailments and foodstuffs. While this allowed the wife still to maintain some semblance of control over those working for her, specifically her household servants and her children, she also found herself a subservient member of the household rather than the head, causing her to straddle a complicated fine line between the two positions. As Margaret Ferguson describes, the early modern wife is “neither the ‘head’ (or ruler) nor the ‘foot’ (or servant) in the one body made by the marriage relation; rather... she is the ‘companion’ of the husband, his ‘yoke-fellow’ but not quite equal” (288). The ambiguity of the woman’s station within the household, the place that is supposed to be her domain, caused many women to lose their understanding of their own place within the home, producing a need to seek solace in their ability to control an important aspect of the household, other than the rearing of children: the servants.

Household servants were commonplace in early modern England. With the exception of the monarch, even top ranking nobility would have been a servant to someone, whether it was the queen’s lady in waiting or the monarch’s councilman. Being a servant or apprentice was a rite of passage for many early modern people, a way of earning a living or furthering a future profession before being married for some while many women saw it as an opportunity to learn how to be a good wife (Wheale 37). There were few households in early modern England that did not have
at least one servant helping with the daily chores with guidance from the wife, while
the greater, nobler houses boasted a number of servants on their payroll.4

Because servants were so commonplace, the number and types of servants a
household maintained was a way of showing one’s social status. For instance, if a
woman was able to have a lady’s maid, specifically for her daily dressing and
undressing, she was considered to be of a higher rank than a woman who did not
employ such a maid. The use of servants to display wealth became increasingly
important, creating a complicated dynamic between servant and master; the
middle- and upper-classes needed servants not only to fulfill their daily needs, but
also to establish their rank within society. For those of a higher rank, servants
became a necessity, which gave some power to the servants themselves. If the
dynamic between a master and his or her servants was not satisfactory, servants
could leave the household, reducing the effect of the master’s display of wealth. To
help maintain an acceptable relationship for both parties, many conduct books for
households and advice books for masters discussed ways a master or mistress could
maintain a healthy relationship with the servants within the household. An example
of advice given to help nourish the master/servant relationship can be seen in an
excerpt from an advice book written by the Earl of Carbery to his son:

Let your servants be temperate, diligent and true… Converse not with
the inferior servants of the family nor with any notoriously vicious…

---

4 The Earl of Leicester had almost 150 servants in the 1580s in his London house
alone, a large number that does not take his country estate into consideration
(Richardson 64).
Take special heed of familiarity with them and suspect them of humouring your vices. For if they once serve you in base unworthy offices from that time they become your masters... A servant who dares speak truth to your distaste and will not assist or obey you in things dishonourable or wicked cherish and love. (quoted in Richardson 64)

Here, we learn that masters should be suspicious of their servants and expect only inferiority and reverence, yet masters are also advised to “cherish and love” those servants who are honest and who do not encourage the immoral behavior of their masters. This double standard of servants created an indistinct relationship between the servant and master, similar to the paradoxical relationship between husband and wife. As a result, the servant had to tread carefully whenever speaking to his master, for if he spoke incorrectly his livelihood would be lost.

Heads of household were also supposed to ignore those servants who were considered “inferior” within the household. The use of the word “inferior” in the above excerpt exemplifies the reflection of the social hierarchy within the household servants. The servant class itself had a specific pecking order to which they must answer within the household (Ingram 93). Depending on the number of servants present, this hierarchy could vary. The top tier servants in the average household normally included the butler, housekeeper, cook, and valet, though the top tier could also extend to include housemaids and footmen as well.

Because masters normally communicated with the superior servants in the household, the woman head of household and the upper crust of servants would,
more likely than not, have a better relationship than that between the male master and the lower servants. Sometimes, this relationship could even cross the obstacle of class and develop into something similar to friendship, formed on the basis of servant loyalty. While it is important to use caution when interpreting the loyalty between servants and their masters as more than an occupational hazard, it does result in a more intimate relationship between a gentlewoman and her serving staff (Mendelson 236-7). This is an important distinction for this paper. Because there was a relationship already established between the woman of the household and the top tier servants, these servants might have participated in the household dramas these women wrote, which are now known as private dramas.
CHAPTER IV

EARLY MODERN PRIVATE DRAMAS

The early modern public theater reflected many of the unwritten (and sometimes written) rules concerning propriety that permeated every nook and cranny society. These strict rules affected the actions and behaviors of its actors, patrons, and audiences. For instance, during Shakespeare’s time, not a single woman playwright saw her creation on public stages (Straznicky 247). Many scholars believe that this was the result of the early modern belief that women should remain silent about their own ideas and political beliefs in the public sphere; instead, their domain remained in the private sphere of the household, the singular place where they were given some semblance of power over others. A woman presenting her ideas in a public forum, such as the public theater, was considered entirely “incompatible with the conception of female virtue as domestic” (247). Those who did make their views known were looked down upon, often called “shrews,” “nags,” or might even be accused of witchcraft (Dolan 143). The social conventions of the time created limited spaces in which a woman could express her opinion, causing her to turn to one arena in which she could express her ideas through the art of theater—the home.
As a method of avoiding the strict parameters on decorum in the public theater, many members of England’s middle- and upper-classes presented a wide range of theatrical activities within their homes, from full-scale plays to masques to small skits performed by household members and staff, creating an alternative form of entertainment. The variety of plays that were written for performance in the home or for circulating among family members are identified as “private,” “household,” or “closet dramas” and normally presented to audiences such issues of morality, politics, and family. Both men and women penned these private dramas, sometimes even co-authoring work. Though men were active writers of these dramas, it is important to note the significance of women playwrights during the early modern period. This form of writing was a powerful means of communication for women, creating a venue that allowed for these voices, silenced within the public sphere, to be heard within a domestic one. Through their writing, these women were able to make their own statements regarding the happenings of the world, veiling their strong beliefs behind the actions of their characters.

Turning to one of the most canonized examples of closet dramas by a woman writer, we can see such commentary in the parallels between the writing of Elizabeth Cary and her life. There has been much scholarly speculation regarding Cary’s marriage to Sir Henry Cary during the time she wrote her well-known private drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam*.

*The Lady Falkland, Her Life*, Cary’s biography written by one of her daughters, states that hers was a marriage of convenience, Henry Cary having married his wife “only for [her] being an heir, for he had no acquaintance with her (she scare ever having spoken to him) and she was nothing
handsome” (*Life* 188). To those who witnessed the marriage, it was obvious there was no love between the couple and thus, many critics argue that Cary attempted to work through this lackluster marriage in her most popular private drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam*. Throughout *Mariam*, the concept of divorce, specifically a woman seeking a divorce, is consistently addressed. Although Herod, the king, marries Mariam after divorcing his first wife, Doris, his sister Salome is denied the right to divorce her husband because she is female. At one point during the play, after being denied her divorce, Salome exclaims, “Why should such privilege to man be given? / Or given to them, why barred from women then?” (1.4.305-6). Here, many critics argue that Cary expresses her own beliefs through Salome’s actions, enforcing the point that divorce should be a right granted to all, regardless of the gender of the person seeking the separation. Because of her own unhappiness within her marriage, Cary conveys, through the character of Salome, her discontent with the societal standards of divorce. Some critics read *Mariam* as a parallel between Cary’s life and those of her two main female characters, Salome and Mariam. I take a different approach to the biographical reading, seeing Cary’s work not as a platform for her beliefs of divorce during early modern England, but rather thinking about the parallels between her campaign for educating her servants and the servants she includes in *Mariam*.

To choose the proper platform for presenting their transgressive beliefs, many early modern women writers sought out ancient works to influence their writing, and in doing so, also displayed their education. Some private dramas written by women were translations of older, well-known dramas, while others,
such as Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*, were based on ancient histories, presenting those who read them an appealing comparison to the original. Modeling their writing on ancient works allowed women writers to reflect the writing of their contemporary male writers; many male playwrights used classical sources to model their own writing on, even Shakespeare, who used Ovid and Seneca as inspiration. The humanist curriculum of education, learned by the nobility and grammar school students in the early modern period, taught reading of Greek and Latin drama as a core activity; thus many women who received such an education would have experience with translation. Women who received a humanist education would have read dramas as models for their own writing and speaking (Straznicky 248). Reading these completed translations out loud then could be considered a form of performance for those learning how to read. Therefore, these private dramas that were considered “mere” translations of Greek and Latin playwrights became an opportunity for women to express their own ideas regarding political debates and gender expectations. They also provided a rhetorical vehicle for these women’s own ideas. Inserting their own thoughts into these translations made private dramas into an incredibly diverse form of entertainment, creating “a more communal, self-reflexive and experimental theatrical tradition than the drama developed on fixed stages for a public” (Straznicky 250).

Through translation, women were also able to express themselves in their word choice. By choosing some words rather than others, female writers took part in word play that added a new dimension to their writing. According to Margaret Ferguson, “homophonic and homonymic word-play flourished... in ways that
rhetoricians and lexicographers since the eighteenth century have typically underestimated” (273). The use of homophones throughout the translated verses of plays created a new method of making a statement without explicitly stating one’s thoughts. Because of the diverse nature of English during the early modern period, choosing a specific word could be interpreted as a mere change in dialect, although a woman might choose it deliberately, thus presenting her viewpoint through that one word.

While Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* is not a translation, it has been heavily influenced by an ancient text, specifically Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*. The use of specific diction, for instance, is illustrated in the character of Graphina, a slave-girl in the household of Pheroras, Herod’s brother, and Pheroras’s lover. Graphina’s character allows Cary to play with the parallels between servants’ and wives’ positions, since they were both social classes in the early modern era that catered to a double standard of expectations. The position of middle- and upper-class women at home had a dual expectation; while they were considered powerful companions to their husbands, these women were not quite considered their husband’s equal. They were often expected to observe the lesson of servants by practicing self-censorship to keep the peace within the home (Ferguson 288). Cary illustrates her own thoughts on this double standard in *Mariam* when Pheroras implores Graphina to speak, stating that to him, “silence is a sign of discontent” (2.1.42). In response, Graphina states, “Your hand hath lifted me from lowest state, / To highest eminency wondrous grace, / And make your handmaid have you made your mate” (2.1.57-59). Some readers might see Cary’s repetition of “hand” and the pun between
maid/made/mate as emphasizing Graphina’s rise through the social ranks a result of Pheroras’s influence. A close reading of these three lines indicates that Cary instead chose this repetition, specifically the homophones “maid” and “made,” to illustrate the power of Cary’s own hand, as it wields a pen and creates this private drama (2.1.59). Just as Pheroras’s hand has lifted Graphina from the rank of a handmaid, Cary has constructed or “made” her own ascension through the social ranks of her own household; Cary’s rise in power is hand-made, just as Graphina states she has risen from being a “handmaid” to Pheroras’s “mate” (2.1.59). In order to overcome her subservient position within her own household, Cary practices the self-censorship that is expected of her, but in an unexpected way—through the voices of her characters.

Thus, through the use of translation, wordplay, and character, early modern private dramas quickly became the means by which many women presented their own ideas, allowing these women playwrights to express themselves in the domestic sphere, since society ensured they could not do so in public. Because private dramas are defined as theatrical performances within the home, expressing the political and social beliefs of those who are not given a voice during the early modern period, it is important to consider the participation of household servants. This particular class of people did not have the opportunity to be heard, so performing within private dramas and speaking words written by a woman whose silence was also similarly prescribed could provide servants with prime opportunities to speak their minds without actually doing so and risking their livelihood. In order to fully understand the concept of household servants acting
within private dramas and the implications of their participation, it is useful to turn again to parallels between Elizabeth Cary's biography and *The Tragedy of Mariam*. 
CHAPTER V
ELIZABETH CARY, HOUSEHOLD SERVANTS, AND THE TRAGEDY OF MARIAM

To better understand the participation of servants within early modern private dramas, I argue that primary sources from early modern women writers allow an in-depth examination of the day-to-day lives of the social groups without power. These primary sources also provide a lens through which to examine the interaction between a master and his or her servants from a non-male perspective. Cary’s extensive biography offers a remarkable insight into Cary's life, while her own private drama allows an in depth look into the possible gender and class dynamics of the genre.

As the most well known private dramatist of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Elizabeth Cary illustrates the servant/master relationship well. Cary penned two extant private dramas during the course of her life, The History of the Life, Reign and Death of Edward II and The Tragedy of Mariam, The Faire Queen of Jewry, both of which allowed Cary to voice her opinion on a variety of public matters. However, in order to fully understand the participation of household servants in private dramas, Mariam is the sole focus of this paper, since it expresses an in-depth commentary on household hierarchy and power. It also may well have
provided Cary’s own household servants opportunities to participate within its performance, specifically with the character of Graphina, a servant, and the Chorus.

Just as *Mariam* provides a look into a private drama that allows for servant participation in performance, a biography of Cary’s life, which was written by one of her four daughters and edited and revised by at least three more of Cary’s children, allows for an extensive firsthand account of her interaction with not only the public and her family, but also the household staff with whom she interacted daily. *The Lady Falkland: Her Life*, Cary’s biography, provides information regarding Cary’s relationship with her staff, something that scholars are not necessarily privy to with other private dramatists, especially early modern women writers. According to Weller and Ferguson, Cary was one of “the first English woman [writers] to be memorialized in a biography” (1). While this claim does not consider the current change in the definition of a “woman writer,” which incorporates women’s writing that was not previous considered, such as letters and advice books, Cary’s biography is still a first hand account that allows a better understanding of Cary’s belief in educating her servants as part of her godly Christian duty. Because of this primary source, I conclude that this inclination might have led to her servants participating in the performances of her private dramas, creating an entirely new lens through which critics can view the play.

*The Life and the Christian Duty of Elizabeth Cary*

Born in either 1585 or 1586 to a lawyer father, Elizabeth Cary was a well-educated child with a propensity towards reading. As the biographer tells it, throughout her childhood, Cary’s candles were consistently taken from her in order
to dissuade her from reading at night when she was ordered to sleep. This caused her to find ways to bribe the household staff into providing her with various reading material, causing her to enter a significant amount of debt (one hundred pounds) before she turned twelve, while also illustrating Cary’s inclination towards developing personal relationships with household staff early on (Life 187-88). Her love of reading continued throughout her household, leading her to choose the activity over her other household duties well into adulthood (194-195). At fifteen years old, Elizabeth was married to Sir Henry Cary and found herself living with her mother-in-law soon after the marriage was established. Many scholars speculate that it was during this time The Tragedy of Mariam was written, before the birth of Cary's first daughter in 1609. Later in life, Cary developed sympathies towards those of the Catholic religion, specifically after reading and disagreeing with Protestant texts (190-191). She eventually turned these sympathies into beliefs, publicly converting from Protestantism to Catholicism in 1626, an action that was considered taboo, even though King Charles I had just married a Catholic, Henrietta Maria. Though this conversion was controversial, Cary was nonetheless dedicated to Catholicism.

Before converting to Catholicism, Elizabeth Cary traveled to Ireland with her husband, who was the lord deputy of the country from 1622 to 1629. While there, Cary was able to demonstrate her inclination towards educating those of the lower class. Though her husband disapproved of her actions, Cary took care of over 160 beggar children, teaching them different of trades within her own workhouse, where these apprentices made a variety of wool garments. According to her
biography, the children “were disposed to their several masters and mistresses to learn those trades they were thought most fit for, the least amongst them being set to something, as making points, tags, buttons, or lace, or some other thing” (197).

Each child was educated in a specific trade that would help him or her later in life. While some of the children were set to do the most menial tasks, such as making buttons or lace, given her propensity for teaching children to read it is likely that Cary taught reading skills to those who were apprenticed to more intellectual based trades, such as accounting.

Cary’s inclination towards educating those of the servant class increased further after she converted to Catholicism. According to David Cressy, the Christian duty of the early modern Catholic was “to help those around him learn to read God’s word,” promoting faith in those believed to be faithless and helping others reach salvation (4). As a devoted Catholic, Elizabeth Cary sought to do just that, sharing the word of God with everyone, including her household servants. In order to make sure her servants remained devoted to the Catholic faith, Cary encouraged reading throughout her household, for “she herself would work hard, together with her women and her maids, curious pieces of work, teaching them and directing all herself” (Life 191). She had such confidence in the education of her servants that some of the better-educated servants even went on to teach Cary’s children, emphasizing that their ability to read exceeded the basic reading level (192). If Cary trusted her servants’ reading skills enough to allow them to teach her own children, they were very likely to be able to perform in her household dramas.
The relationship between Elizabeth Cary and her household servants was unique in its equality, with Cary caring more about securing the future of her servants than about training them to suit her own needs—sometimes, even more so than her own children. When a servant first entered her care, “she was very careful they should be well brought up, and to have them learn rather those things that might after be profitable or graceful to themselves than what was useful for her” (200). A prime example of Cary caring about her servants can be seen in her relationship with Bessie Poutler, a household servant Cary taught and converted to the Catholic religion: “She had at first much ado to get her to see or speak with a priest, whom [Bessie] seriously believed to be all witches... but at last by [the] means of Father Dunstan was converted and reconciled” (Life 210). Through the conversion of Bessie, Cary illustrated her willingness to expand her servants’ futures and what she thought to be her Christian duty to help others read the Bible. This created the opportunity for household servants to gain the literacy needed to perform in Cary’s private dramas. Not only did Cary encourage the trade skills that would better her servants later in life, but she also helped her servants on their journey to literacy, an action that possibly allowed Cary to cast the more literate servants in performances of her private dramas.

Household Servants and The Tragedy of Mariam

When The Tragedy of Mariam was first published in 1613, Elizabeth Cary became the first English woman to publish an original play, allowing her both to break through the barriers placed on her because of her sex and illustrate her own opinions on political and religious matters of the time. The play was born from
Cary’s extensive humanistic education, which focused on ancient historical texts, the most important of which is the *Antiquities of the Jews* because it includes the story of Herod the Great’s marriage to “the royal-blooded Jewish woman Mariam,” the story that is the basis of Cary’s play (Weller and Ferguson 17). Finding interest in Jewish laws and customs would not have been considered uncommon during the Tudor-Stuart era, with many popular playwrights, such as Shakespeare and Marlowe, including Jewish characters within their public plays. Therefore, Cary’s choice of subject matter for writing *Mariam* was not necessarily out of the ordinary. In both Cary’s and Josephus’s renditions, Herod, the king of Palestine, is believed to be dead, and he has decreed that Mariam should be put to death once he dies, although when the play opens, we know his servants have disobeyed his order. When Herod returns in Act IV of *Mariam*, dispelling the false report of his death, he is convinced by his sister, Salome, that Mariam has been unfaithful in his absence, making Mariam’s death a certainty. This general plotline is the one area in which *Antiquities* and *Mariam* are similar, for there are many differences in Cary’s rendering of the story. With her extensive knowledge regarding the *Antiquities*, Cary was able to shape the story of Herod and Mariam into something all her own. She utilizes the plotline to make a statement about the silence of inferiors in a patriarchal society, creating a contrast between the characters of Mariam, who wavers between brash outspokenness and obedient silence, and Graphina, another less prominent female character.

While the character of Graphina is a minor role in the *The Tragedy of Mariam*, she still holds an important position in the play, acting as a foil to Mariam’s cautious
outspokenness, as many critics have noted. Throughout the play, Cary molds Graphina into the perfect personification of what many people during the early modern era believed to be a “good” wife: a woman who is chaste, silent, and obedient. As a slave-girl in Herod’s court, Graphina is the lover of Herod’s brother, Pheroras. Due to the position she finds herself in, not to mention her rank as a household servant, Graphina presents the ideal venue for Cary to characterize the expectations a patriarchal society places on women to act in accordance to set social standards, showcasing silence as a meaningful attribute; not only was it an asset in a wife and a female servant, but it was also considered to have a great deal of power.

Graphina’s ability to bridle her tongue created a struggle of sorts between her and Pheroras, her betrothed and the man who should have power over her in a patriarchal society; her silence was so extreme that Pheroras begs her to speak, believing her lack of words to be a “sign of discontent” (2.1.42). When Graphina finally does speak, she says only what her husband-to-be wants to hear: “You know my wishes ever yours did meet: / If I be silent, ‘tis no more but fear / That I should say too little when I speak (2.1.48-50). Through these lines, Cary voices her opinions regarding men’s expectations of female acquiescence. Graphina’s use of self-censored speech provides the voiceless, a female servant an agency as she speaks the words she knows those in power want to hear. Because Graphina censors herself, Pheroras has no way of knowing what she is truly thinking, since “her words are not a transparent window to her mind” (Ferguson 288). This gives the slave-girl authority in her silence. Because silence can signify either power or meekness, a capable reader might realize the ambiguous context of Graphina’s twenty-seven-line
part, performing it in a manner that her silence is a protest against the constraints the early modern patriarchal powers placed upon both women and the lower class.

Indeed, silence is a powerful form of expression, mostly because it is more difficult to read than any other form of communication, something an educated reader, such as a well-read servant, would understand when presented with Graphina’s character. Even in a household where the social hierarchy was more lax, such as Elizabeth Cary’s, the ability for a servant to speak his or her mind was still limited. Through Graphina’s lines, or lack thereof, a well-read servant participating in a private performance of *Mariam* would have the perfect vehicle to express her own ideas about the power a patriarchal society keeps from those of lower rank. Therefore, I would argue Graphina’s character would likely have been assigned to Cary’s actual female servants to perform. Cary’s willingness to educate her servants to the fullest extent would make it possible for a servant not only to read *The Tragedy of Mariam*, but also, this servant could read the part of Graphina in a more comprehensive way, recognizing the character’s strategic use of silence and self-censorship as a protest against patriarchy.

As Graphina’s role demonstrates, silence was one of the most powerful forms of communication in the early modern household, frequently disrupting the servant/master relationship. Silence was both treasured and punished in the early modern household, especially since servants were so prevalent within that time. As Richard Lucas declared in 1685, “Tis by [servants] the order and beauty of the world in a great measure subsists, for where there are no servants there could be no masters” (quoted in “Social Engineering” 169). Masters depended on servants for
the running of the early modern household and masters have specific expectations of these servants, similar to that of women; servants were expected to censor themselves, saying only what their masters wanted to hear and speaking only when their masters asked (“Social Engineering” 172). If a servant witnessed a scandalous event within his or her house of employment, the master valued his servant’s silence, gaining a sense of security from it. However, when a servant remained silent when his master asked him to speak, this was seen as a punishable offense, worthy of a severe reprimand and possibly even dismissal. Because silence could be considered a means of protest, performing as Graphina’s character offered a servant an opportunity to express her thoughts regarding class segregation, just as Graphina allowed Cary to present her thoughts on gender repression. If a servant was aware of Graphina’s self-censorship, then she, too, could demonstrate to her master that she was capable of this restraint, an interpretation of the text Cary likely would not have anticipated. Acting as Graphina within Cary’s private drama would give a servant actress the ability to showcase the complex dynamic of silence within the household, while also speaking out against those in power who caused the creation of such a complicated form of protest.

Just as Graphina represents the “modest woman,” the Chorus is also more than they seem, giving Cary yet another venue to interrogate the patriarchal ideals of feminism. In typical classical dramas, the Chorus acts as a narrator of sorts, giving moral insight and offering a variety of background information regarding the storyline of the play. The Chorus within *The Tragedy of Mariam* is no different, representing a collective company of Jews who present their own prescriptions for
wifely virtue. Just as choruses throughout classic dramas present the common values and concerns of the cultural group in power, Cary’s Chorus presents the ideals of the patriarchal society in which it was written. Throughout the play, the Chorus censures Mariam for different moral faults, specifically outspokenness and her failure to perform her sexual duty toward her husband. For instance, in Act One the Chorus asserts that Mariam wishes Herod, her husband, dead because she is searching for sexual “variety,” although according to Mariam herself, she wishes to just be free of him (1.1.518). The parallel between the Chorus and the patriarchal ideals in early modern England exist throughout the play, allowing Cary to make a statement that her contemporary society’s standards were contradictory.

These moral faults that the Chorus sees Mariam and other female characters in the play are similar faults the early modern society would see in women, as well as servants. If servants were performing as the Chorus, the repercussions of this role on the early modern home’s class structure would have been significant.

Because Mariam is such a significant character in the play, we can assume that a member of the upper class, whether it was the mistress of the household or a female guest of the host, performed her role. As previously observed, the Chorus frequently plies Mariam with moral advice. If servants played the role of the Chorus, as I suggest, this role would provide them with the opportunity to freely advise a member of the upper class, something that was unlikely even in the early modern household. While the words of advice would not be their own, the lines of the Chorus still present the prime opportunity for servants to speak out against the upper class, as when the Chorus speaks these lines discussing the issues of rank:
Yet oft we see that some in humble state,
Are cheerful, pleasant, happy, and content:
When those indeed that are of higher state,
With vain additions do their thoughts torment.

Th’one would to his mind his fortune bind,
Th’other to his fortune frames his mind. (1.6.505-10)

The Chorus comments on the idea that those who are in “humble state,” or the lower class, are often happier than those of “higher state,” due to the higher class’s consistent focus on rising higher in ranks. The implications of a servant speaking these words to a member of a higher rank are complex. If a servant was aware of the meaning behind these words, then he would be freely stating that the upper class was motivated only by “his fortune,” giving the servant the power of freely speaking his or her mind. The Chorus would allow a servant to consciously speak out against the patriarchy through the group’s discussion of class issues, while appearing to merely act.

While the Chorus does attempt to share such moral insights throughout The Tragedy of Mariam, when examined closely, their speeches also contain a number of contradictions. Similar to Graphina, the Chorus presents the idea of a silent wife as a good wife, advising Mariam to keep her tongue and articulating the concept of self-censorship, while also illustrating the “distinction between the forums available to speaking women” (Nesler 363). This is particularly obvious in Act 3, when they state, “her mind if not peculiar is not chaste” (3.3.242). According to the Chorus, by speaking outside of her marriage, Mariam is committing an act equivalent to
adultery. While one might see this as Cary advocating the constraints of a patriarchal society, a critical look at the Chorus’s discussion of womanly speech says otherwise.

The Chorus’s speech at the end of Act 3 is contradictory as a whole, illustrating—much like Graphina does—Cary’s thoughts on the conflicting nature of the early modern patriarchal society. For instance, the idea of “virtue” the Chorus advocates shifts in its definitions from stanza to stanza. First it stresses the difference between the desire for speech and sexual chastity. According to the Chorus, a woman who gives “a private word to any second ear / And though she may with reputation live, / Yet though most chaste, she doth her glory blot, / And wounds her honour, though she kills it not” (3.3.229-32). In this section, a woman who speaks a private word to anyone but her husband might “blot” her glory and wound her honor, but she has not lost her chastity. As the speech progresses, the difference between public speaking and chastity fades, with the Chorus eventually stating, “When any’s ears but one therewith they fill, / Doth in a sort her pureness overthrow” (3.3.247-8). In the matter of a few lines, the Chorus has contradicted themselves, saying instead that a woman who speaks publicly is considered as unchaste as a woman who commits adultery. These last lines imply what the previous lines did not. A woman speaking publicly to anyone but her husband causes her to lose her pureness entirely, whereas before, the Chorus was merely insinuating her pureness would be slightly bruised. By implying that speaking to anyone but the “one therewith,” referring to Mariam’s husband, Herod, Cary utilizes
the contradictory manner of the Chorus’s speech to present to the early modern audience the idea of conflicting expectations in her contemporary society.

As noted earlier, a woman’s position in the early modern household was precarious, constantly balancing the power of a master and the inferiority of someone outside the group of power (males). Within the household itself, the positions of those who were not the male head of the household (i.e. the wife, children, and servants) were constantly shifting. Servants in particular had a precarious position within the household, told to heed their master’s every demand, regardless of its difficulty, while they were also warned against assisting these very same masters in anything dishonorable (Richardson 64). Elizabeth Cary uses *The Tragedy of Mariam* to make a statement regarding the gender politics of the early modern era.

While Mariam allows Cary to critique a wife's social position, as I have been suggesting, so too could literate servants see her work as a way to make their own statement regarding the strict class structure of the period. As a group of Jews, the Chorus illustrates the clashing ideals a patriarchal society expects from those without power. The description of the group itself within the listing of the play’s characters as a “company of Jews” suggests that a wide array of servants could carry out the role, while also providing these servants with the prime opportunity to illustrate to those who do have power over them the complex and ever-changing nature of the serving class’s position within the household and society as a whole. Just as Graphina’s silence gives a female servant the opportunity to showcase the power of silence, both as a wife and servant, the Chorus allows all household
servants to illustrate the contradictory standards to which all servants were held to in a patriarchal society. While the education of every servant might not lend to such a critical understanding of the Chorus, I would argue that those servants who did have a deeper understanding of the role would possibly share their insights with others. As a result, the group of performers would have been able to convey not only the message that Cary intended to direct towards England’s patriarchal society, but also provide a critical response to those with power inside the household.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

Many of Elizabeth Cary’s contemporaries might have read *The Tragedy of Mariam* as a mere reenactment of Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*, but if readers critically analyze the drama, they will see that it is didactic in nature. Rather than acting as a confirmation of the patriarchal ideals of early modern society, *Mariam* instead speaks out against them, using characters such as Graphina and the Chorus to illustrate the clashing nature of the unspoken rules of patriarchy. Through these characters, Cary provides ample opportunities for her own household servants to participate in the performance of this private drama, making it likely that household servants who were well-read helped their masters perform in household entertainment. The potential of household servants participation is important to acknowledge, as it changes the stereotypical view of the servant class’s position within early modern society. At the same time, it also answers the research question proposed at the beginning of this thesis regarding the participation of the household staff in the performance of private drama. Rather than being merely a cog in the machine of household production, the participation of servants within private dramas enables scholars to acknowledge that the lower class may have been
presented with opportunities to subvert power through characters within these dramas. Examining the life of Elizabeth Cary, one of the most well-known and studied private dramatists of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and her work, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, allows me to illustrate the likelihood of household servants performing in household dramas and the implications of their performances. The question of which servants would have performed in these private dramas still remains.

Based on the research I have conducted, I argue that those servants who may have acted in household performances of private dramas were not only able to read, but also high ranking members of the servant class (i.e., ladies maids, butlers, housekeepers, tutors, etc.). Because of the restricted education many servants received due to the strict social hierarchy of the early modern period, I suggest the higher ranked servants would likely be able to read at a high enough level to perform in a drama. This might allow them to not only read the play in the most basic sense, but also closely examine their roles for the political and social statements many private drama playwrights incorporated into their work. While it is entirely possible that lower-ranking servants, such as scullery maids and errand boys, had a rudimentary understanding of the written word, only those of a higher rank would have the literacy skill needed to memorize a variety of lines and truly use their roles to speak out against the restrictions their social status placed upon them.

This leads to my next conclusion regarding the specific type of characters household servants would play. After examining the social hierarchy of the period, I
conclude that household servants might have been assigned the minor roles within private dramas, leaving the major roles for the masters of the household and their guests. Those considered the middle- and upper-class would find a servant performing a major role inexcusable, especially if a member of higher class was playing a minor one. Performing these private dramas would allow for the reestablishment of hierarchy within the household, taking the social strata and duplicating it within this specific area of household entertainment. While acting as a minor character would reiterate the class structure within the household, a well-read servant might see this character role as an opportunity protest against the restrictions of their class. Because many women used private dramas as a way to speak out against society, servants performing in these dramas might use the characters’ lines as subtle ways of expressing their own political and social beliefs, not just that of the author.

While there is much information regarding the general role of household servants within early modern society, there is currently a gap in scholarship regarding the participation of these servants in dramas performed within the privacy of middle- and upper-class homes. The research that I completed regarding this topic seeks to fill this gap, creating a better understanding of how private dramas influenced the restrictions early modern society placed upon those with little power. Understanding the extent to which household servants participated within early modern private dramas allows current scholars to see how much the strict social hierarchy of the period influenced every day life and entertainment. Though the patriarchal structure of society restricted many women and members of
the lower class from speaking out publicly against their oppression, private dramas enabled those who were considered voiceless to once again adapt a voice. It’s my hope that we will continue to research this topic to gain an even better understanding on the influence early modern England’s strict social structure had on the every-day life of its people.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


