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‘DANCING THROUGH THE MINEFIELD’: CANON REINSTATEMENT STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN AUTHORS

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***Abstract:** The paper explores the limiting and detrimental effects of biographical criticism and exceptionalism in the efforts of reinstating women authors into the Renaissance canon, by looking into the literary merits of Elizabeth Cary’s The Tragedy of Mariam, The Fair Queen of Jewry and The History of The Life, Reign and Death of Edward II. Whereas the conflation of biography and fiction is a successful recipe for canonization and for the production of feminist icons, it renders the text impotent because of its resulting inability to compete with or to be seen in correlation and interplay with other contemporary texts.*

***Keywords:** biographical criticism, canonical reinstatement, Jacobean drama, Stuart patriarchy.*

Introduction

Reinstating women writers into the literary canon of the Renaissance poses serious problems, and the whole process of creating the Renaissance canon has been the victim of a complex set of factors and of political agendas, as has often been stated – ranging from plays chosen for performance by the RSC, to texts published by the major academic publishing houses, to texts chosen for teaching at undergraduate level. It is probably this, as Stephanie Hodgson-Wright argues, that provides the most telling evidence of the status of Renaissance women writers, because, due to

limits of time and resources, the inclusion of one text leads to the exclusion of another (1998:55).

One of the most counterproductive of such reinstatement strategies is that of presenting a woman writer as a historical phenomenon rather than as a producer of significant texts, something which will bar her from inclusion in the mainstream cultural milieu of the Renaissance; her texts will then be studied as token texts, with an emphasis on their historical rather than their literary significance – text and author featuring as historical curiosity or, based on their exceptional status, feminist icons. Paradoxically, the woman author is then written out of the canon or placed on the fringes of the canon by being put on a tall pedestal and styled a historical phenomenon, a *monument historique* (this is how for more than five centuries Christine de Pizan, a formidable author and one of the most accomplished writers of the Middle Ages, has been written out of the literary canon (Dascăl 2015:26)). Simon Shepherd's edition of five Renaissance pamphlets written in defence of women and by women ends with the conclusion: "we are left with a handful of texts, *all limited intellectually and politically by their being produced in an age before feminism*, but all nevertheless remarkable for their intellectual bravery and adventure; *remarkable, in short, that they exist*" (1985:23; emphasis mine). It is true that it would be anachronistic in the extreme to speak of feminism in the 1620s, but at the same time the fact that there was no recognizable resistance discourse to patriarchal authority in Stuart England does not mean that texts produced by the likes of Rachel Speght, Esther Sowernam or Constantia Munda were limited in scope or artistic achievement. We consider that the fact that such authors succeeded in articulating a discourse of resistance without the support of a

recognizable group points to the greater political and intellectual skill of the women who wrote under such circumstances.

The case of Elizabeth Cary fully illustrates how counterproductive the critical emphasis on biographical contingencies and on exceptionalism can be. Cary, a remarkable woman, achieved many “firsts” amongst Englishwomen, with *The Tragedy of Mariam* being the first original play by an English female author and *The History of the Life, Reign, and Death of Edward II* the first political history written by an Englishwoman; she was also the subject of the first biography of a female English author, which was written by one of her daughters.

Cary is the author of an impressive variety of texts. Her earliest surviving work is *The Mirror of the World*, a translation of Abraham Ortelius’s geographical atlas; *The Tragedy of Mariam* was published in 1613 but written probably in 1604; there is *The History of the Life, Reign and Death of Edward II*, and its shorter variant the *History of the Most Unfortunate Prince, King Edward II*; an English translation of *The Reply of the Most Illustrious Cardinal of Perron*, a work of Catholic propaganda, was published in 1630 and dedicated to Henrietta Maria. A manuscript biography of Cary written c.1650 by one of her daughters, a nun at the English Benedictine convent at Cambrai in France, was edited by Richard Simpson in 1861 and entitled *Lady Falkland: her Life*. We find from this biography that she also wrote a verse life of Tamburlaine, the subject of two plays by Christopher Marlowe. Later, she composed verses to the Virgin Mary; she wrote lives of St. Agnes, St. Elizabeth of Portugal, and St. Mary Magdalene; she completed translations of Seneca; she died in 1639 while working on a translation of the Flemish mystic Louis de Blois.

Unfortunately, Cary scholarship, brilliant and valuable as it has proved to be over the past decades, while convincingly advocating her right to inclusion in the literary canon of the Renaissance, has effected a canonization verging in many cases on hagiography, in giving pride of place to the ‘authority of experience’ or laying unacceptable emphasis on biographical data (for example Nancy Cotton in her article of 1977 invokes ‘excessive childbearing’ and ‘religious mania’ as the driving forces of her writing). Elaine Beilin, Margaret Ferguson, Tina Krontiris and Betty Travitsky have undoubtedly created the necessary awareness of Cary and her works through their biographical criticism, but this should be only the initial stage in the battle for reinstatement.

The Elizabeth Cary ‘Myth’

Elizabeth Tanfield was the only child of well-off parents who were supportive within certain limits of their daughter’s love for reading and learning. Elizabeth was a voracious reader, bribing servants to supply her with candles for night-time study. She was a linguistic and literary prodigy and was exceptionally well educated – her tutors may have included the Renaissance poets Michael Drayton and John Davies, both of whom later praised her and her learning, and she was among the dedicatees of Drayton’s *Englands Heroicall Epistles* (1597) and of Davies’ *The Muses Sacrifice* (1612).

When she was fifteen, her father arranged her marriage to Sir Henry Cary, later to become Viscount Falkland. Her husband was a soldier in the Low Countries and was then taken hostage by the Spanish, so that the young couple only set up house together seven years later. From 1608 to 1624 she was almost constantly pregnant, giving birth to eleven children. Around

1622, she accompanied her husband to Ireland, where he took up the post of Lord Deputy. Whereas his letters indicate his deep distrust of Irish Catholics, Cary herself seems to have been on friendly terms with many of them. In 1625, she travelled to London with her children but without her husband, and there, on 14 November 1626, she declared her conversion to Catholicism, which resulted in her husband's unsuccessful attempt to divorce her, although he did deny her access to their children. Elizabeth was put under house arrest by the King in the hope that she would recant, but after six weeks the Crown was convinced that she would not return to the Church of England and she was allowed to come and go at will. Her father disinherited her and her husband refused her financial assistance and consequently she lived in abject circumstances – a triple form of marginalization – as a woman, as an author and as a Catholic, a recusant, though she still managed to maintain connections with a constellation of politically prominent women despite her conversion to Catholicism. She also repeatedly applied to the Privy Council of England and petitioned the king for support and, like Aemilia Lanyer and Anne Clifford, she exploited the patronage system to the full by having a lady of high rank, Katherine Villiers, one of the ladies of the Queen's Bedchamber, represent her case. She proved to be most adept at making effective use of a supportive network of well-connected friends. When her husband died in 1633, she sought to regain custody of her children from her eldest son Lucius. She was questioned in the Star Chamber for kidnapping her sons (she had previously, and more easily, gained custody of her daughters), but although she was threatened with imprisonment there is no record of any punishment. By the end of Elizabeth's life four of her daughters had gone on to become Benedictine nuns, and one of her sons entered the priesthood.

The Candidate for Canonical Reinstatement

Because her daughter's biography closely follows Cary's progress to Catholicism it was her religious conversion that mainly informs her reading of her mother's play *The Tragedy of Mariam* (the religious significance of Mariam's death; historical and scriptural parallels abound: her beheading is linked to that of Mary Stuart, a more famous victim of Protestant tyranny, or to that of Christ's harbinger, John the Baptist). Margaret Ferguson's anachronistic use of Cary's conversion to Catholicism is particularly emphasized in her analysis of *The Tragedy of Mariam* – written many years before her conversion – and she refers when talking about the martyr-like death of Miriam to the 'uncannily proleptic justification of Cary's own rebellious path' (1992:245). The heroine of the biography and the heroine of her tragedy become conflated and Mariam is viewed as a literary manifestation of the Cary of the biography, which is an unfailing recipe for their becoming canonized as feminist icons, revered indeed, but impotent to compete or to be seen in correlation and in interplay with other contemporary texts on the same topic. Unfortunately, the fusion was given further credence when Margaret Ferguson and Barry Weller decided to publish *The Tragedy of Mariam* and the biography *Lady Falkland, Her Life, by one of Her Daughters* together in their edition of 1994, thus perversely confirming biography as the supreme critical tool (Hodgson-Wright 1998:60).

The play is part of the European tradition of dramas about Herod and Mariam, upon which two other English Renaissance plays were based – Gervase Markham and William Sampson's *The True Tragedy of Herod and Antipater: With the Death of faire Mariam* (1622) and Philip Massinger's

The Duke of Millaine (1623) – and there are of course discernible similarities between *Mariam* and *Othello*.

The Tragedy of Mariam was a remarkably progressive text for its time, not only because it was the first English play to be written by a woman, but because it created strong, assertive and self-confident women characters at a time when for a woman to go public in this way – to publish anything – was much more than a *faux pas*, bringing the woman concerned dangerously close to social death. To bring out a play was particularly risky, considering that *The Tragedy of Mariam* was published three years before Ben Jonson published his First Folio (1616) and made a claim for plays to be taken seriously as literature.

In her work, as in no other early modern play, it is over 320 lines into Act I before Cary allows a male character onstage: we have Mariam's long soliloquy, then her dialogue with her mother, Alexandra, and with Salome, and only 324 lines later does the Arabian prince Silleus, Salome's new lover, ready to do her bidding, step on to the stage). And Cary's women characters are a real handful: they are angry, they are jealous, they are Machiavellian. Once they start talking they do not give up in a hurry. The splendid villainess, Salome, so much like Vittoria Corrombona (in Webster's *White Devil*) or Alice Arden, is a 'Richard III in high heels', wrote Elizabeth Schafer in 2013 on the 400th anniversary of the publication of Cary's play (<http://bloggingshakespeare.com/the-bard-of-burford>).

Elizabeth Cary drew on Jewish histories by Flavius Josephus to create a closet drama about Mariam, the second wife of Herod the Great, but there are many instances of proto-feminist subversion in her use of Josephus' *The Jewish Wars* and *Antiquities*, translated into English by Thomas Lodge in 1602 (see Wright 1994:75-76). The play discusses

revenge, scheming, and plotting as core elements, which all aid Cary's critique of patriarchal tyranny; her social commentary on divorce and female agency questions male authority, which is bold and innovative for the time. Mariam becomes the protagonist of the domestic politics of love, sex and marriage and in accordance with Aristotle's *Poetics* the entire action is set in Jerusalem, whereas Josephus follows his protagonist Herod on his military campaigns around the eastern Mediterranean. The play celebrates a 'triumgynate' that emerges and thrives in the first three acts (when Herod is believed to have been killed by Octavius), with women enjoying their newly-acquired freedom; gender relations and sexual relations are focused on instead of 'masculine' state politics. When Herod unexpectedly returns, Mariam has to decide what to do. She struggles with how to respond since, on the one hand, she had been relieved to receive the news of his death, as she is angry with Herod for killing her brother and grandfather; on the other, she knows that he loved her and she feels trapped by her sense of duty as Herod's wife. The emphasis is on her chastity, innocence and heroic attempt to live as true to herself as she possibly can (Wright 1994:103-104). Throughout the play Cary gives us a subtle portrayal of the mechanisms of Stuart patriarchy – a society where the ideological practice of translating the lust of the male subject into the wantonness of the female object is a major means of social control, since the woman who is commonly acknowledged as desirable can easily be redefined as a whore.

The symbiotic relationship between biography and text is illustrated in the case of her history of Edward II, which Tina Krontiris, for example, reads as a pseudo-biography of Cary, drawing parallels between Cary and Queen Isabel, after the author converted to Catholicism (1997:94-98). Her *History of the Life, Reign, and Death of Edward II*, a political fable based on

historical events, was not published until 1680, during the time of the Exclusion Crisis, but Falkland had written it much earlier, in 1627.

All through this piece Cary strongly emphasises the idea of favouritism and how it can lead to disastrous consequences. Piers Gaveston's power as Edward's favourite provoked discontent both among the barons and in the French royal family and Edward was forced to exile him to Ireland. On Gaveston's return, the barons pressured the King into agreeing to wide-ranging reforms – the Ordinances of 1311. The newly empowered barons banished Gaveston, to which Edward responded by revoking the reforms and recalling his favourite. Led by Edward's cousin, Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, a group of barons seized Gaveston and executed him in 1312, beginning several years of armed confrontation. English forces were pushed back in Scotland, where Edward was decisively defeated by Robert the Bruce at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314; widespread famine followed, with social unrest, and subsequently criticism of the King mounted and opposition to the regime grew. When Isabella (married to Edward II at the age of 12 because her father, the French King Philip IV, hoped this would resolve the conflicts between France and England over the latter's possession of Gascony and claims to Anjou, Normandy and Aquitaine) was sent to France, together with her son, the future Edward III, to negotiate a peace treaty in 1325, she turned against Edward and refused to return. Isabella allied herself with the exiled Roger Mortimer and invaded England with a small army in 1326, whereupon the King's forces deserted him. Isabella deposed Edward (an unprecedented event, breaching the inviolability of anointed kingship, given that since the Norman Conquest no English king had been deposed – this is underlined by Griffith (1993:203-204)), becoming regent on behalf of her son, Edward III. Isabella and

Mortimer's regime began to crumble, partly because of her lavish spending, but also because the Queen successfully, but unpopularity, resolved long-running problems such as the wars with Scotland. In 1330, Isabella's son, Edward III, deposed Mortimer in turn, taking back his authority and executing Isabella's lover. The Queen was not punished, however, and lived on for many years in considerable style – although not at Edward III's court – until her death in 1358.

Edward II's story was repeatedly retold in literary form from the end of the 16th century to the 18th century, spanning the period from Elizabeth I to Anne; he is undoubtedly the king most written about during the 16th and 17th centuries (Wright 1994:160). Inevitably, each retelling has the potential to be read as an allegory of the reign in which it was written, starting from the trope of Master and Minion or the more mythical Jove-Ganymede relation with all the subsequent politico-erotic power dynamics (204-205). The story of Edward II's reign was available in the 1620s in various forms. It had been dramatised by Christopher Marlowe in the 1590s and had also been the subject of Michael Drayton's long poems, *Piers Gaveston* and the *Mortimeriados*, revised several years later as *Barons' Wars*; there was also Francis Hubert's poem *The Deplorable Life and Death of Edward the Second, King of England Together with the Downefall of the Two Vnfortunate Fauorits, Gauestone and Spencer*. Edward's story appeared in John Bouchier's English translation of Jean Froissart's French *Chronicles of England* (1523), in Robert Fabyan's *Chronicle* (1533), in the third volume of Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), in John Stow's *A Summary of English Chronicles* (1565) and in his *Annals* (1592), and in prose histories by John Speed (1611) and Samuel Daniel (1618).

Interestingly, however, Cary's story in both the longer folio and the printed octavo is based almost exclusively upon Richard Grafton's *A Chronicle at Large*, which was first published in 1568, and as Karen Britland explains, this was not only on account of Grafton's work being a distinctly nationalist project, given the foreignness of the authors of the other more famous histories, but chiefly because during her house arrest it seems to have been the only available historical source. (Britland 2010) Yet Cary, far from simply replicating the work of historians, offers a critical commentary on historical events, while at the same time steering clear of fictionalization. She does not become a 'proto-novelist'; rather, as Barbara Lewalski has noted, she seems to be exploring a new kind of 'Tacitean', 'politic' history in the vein of Machiavelli and Guicciardini (Lewalski 1994:203). Cary's history of Edward II is a mainly didactic text that serves both as a factual representation of history and as a moral *exemplum*.

I will not discuss here the paternity, or rather, 'maternity', of the two texts, but I will simply mention the fact that both the shorter Finch-Hatton manuscript, dated January 1626 and very similar to the printed octavo text, and the other Fitzwilliam manuscript, similar to the longer folio text and dated February 1627 (in new style dating, January 1627 for the former and February 1628 for the latter), were for centuries attributed to her husband, Henry Cary, Viscount Falkland. It is only since 1935, when Donald A. Stauffer first made the suggestion that both texts were written by Elizabeth Cary, that the body of evidence that attributes authorship to Elizabeth, Lady Falkland, has been growing, culminating with Jeremy Maule's discovery of the two related manuscripts in the mid 1990s (see Reeves 2007:125-144 and Skura 1996:79-104). What is interesting, though, and hardly comes as a surprise, is the fact that as literary critics have come to accept the idea that

the Edward II histories were written by a woman, the critical discourse has, more or less subtly, altered.

The story of Edward II and his favourites was newly of interest in the 1620s, having seen a first flourishing in the 1590s when people were concerned about Queen Elizabeth's relationship with the Earl of Essex. The story was highly topical in the context of the court situation of 1627, with a French-born Queen, Henrietta Maria, England in conflict with France, and the King at odds with his Parliament over the impeachment of the Duke of Buckingham who exerted such a powerful influence first over, King James and then over his son Charles I. However, it is clear that Cary is pursuing an agenda different from that of her source text. She manipulates the facts as she received them from Grafton, reforming historical events to make them more conducive to her purposes. Cary's history intervenes directly in the debate about monarchical absolutism, engaging with issues of law, justice, mercy, counsel, tyranny, right government and Christian morality. In a 1610 speech to Parliament, James I had echoed contemporary political debates about the King's divine right: "I will not be content that my power be disputed upon", James observed, "but I shall ever be willing to make the reason appear of all *my doings* and rule *my actions* according to *my laws*" (James I's speech to Parliament, 21 March 1610, qtd in Hattaway 2002:110; emphasis mine). Although James here asserts his willingness to adhere to the law and thus comes to illustrate that royal 'moderatism' characteristic of English monarchy vs. the absolutism of the French Bourbons, it remains 'his' law and he clearly states that his subjects have no right to question his power; only God has the authority to direct a monarch's decisions. There is an interesting shift of attitudes as far as the topic of the King's divine right is concerned. Whereas in the earlier version of the history we see how an

absolute king in thrall to his passions can become a tyrant: “Kings are Gods on Earth [...] ought in all their Actions to direct the imitation after a Divine Nature, which inclines to Mercy more than Justice”, in the 1628 version, after the battle of Boroughbridge, Valence, Earl of Pembroke is given a speech in which he attempts to persuade Edward not to take bloody revenge upon the rebellious barons Lancaster and Mowbray. Counselling mercy and moderation, he utters the surprising words: “Kings are but men, that have their fates attend them, which measure out to them, what they to others. Blood is a crying sin that cries for vengeance, which follows swiftly those that vainly shed it”.

It is furthermore significant that the title page of this later version of Cary’s history bears a Latin epigram which reads: *Qui nescit dissimulare, nequit vivere, perire melius* (“He who does not know how to dissimulate, is not able to live, rather will perish”). This seems to be a reflection on Cary’s recusancy, as she could no longer dissemble her conversion to Catholicism, and it also tells us that she was writing at a moment of intense anguish and physical deprivation. Yet again, the epigram connects her to contemporary political debates, and, as Jonathan Goldberg has noted, the phrase *Qui nescit dissimulare, nescit regnare* (“He who does not know how to dissimulate, does not know how to rule”) was associated with Tacitus’s Emperor Tiberius, who dissimulated his intentions to Gallus when the latter tried to meddle in the *arcana imperii*. The phrase chosen by Cary was used, in part, by Robert Burton, both in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* and in his Latin *Philosophaster*. (Goldberg 1989:68)

Although there had been many studies of the life of Edward II, most of them had largely ignored Queen Isabel. Isabella became a popular “femme fatale” figure in plays and literature over the years, usually being

portrayed as a beautiful but cruel and manipulative person, very similar to Isabella of Bavaria, the French queen and regent, who played such a pivotal role in the dramatic events in France at the turn of the 15th century. Many modern critics have observed how the longer version of the Edward II story, *The History of the Life, Reign, and Death of Edward II*, presents Edward's queen Isabella in a favourable light. Cary's text includes a full, complex, and arguably feminist portrait of the Queen: *The Queen, who was guilty but in circumstance, and but an accessory to the intention, not the fact, tasted with a bitter time of repentance what it was but to be quoted in the margin of such a story*. Tina Krontiris comments: "The queen's appearance in the history is strategically delayed until Edward's abuse has been sufficiently – and emphatically – exposed. Her affair with Mortimer is described only briefly, while he is made to appear more like a companion to her griefs than a sexual partner [...] The author makes Edward's end a providential piece of work, and while she implicates Mortimer, she exonerates the queen'. (Krontiris 1992:94)

Edward is seen to follow on the heels of a powerful father-ruler, showing an ambition equal to his father's but, alas, without his ability and diplomacy, his leadership choices being manipulated by his favourites – Gaveston and Spencer. In Cary's take on historical events it is not Mortimer but Spencer who is the villain, and Isabel features as nothing short of a saviour – she saves England from the disaster caused by Edward and Spencer. Exactly like Christine de Pizan, Elizabeth Cary is defining a gendered body politic, engaging with men's politics but also showing women's strategies for negotiating power, as the court offers them ample opportunities for exerting power and influence. Isabel is therefore portrayed as a model queen, in stark contrast with the weak and villainous character

presented in the other histories of Edward II (Nelson 2000:157-175) – a model for the young and recently married Henrietta Maria but also for other powerful ladies at the court (particularly those of the Buckingham circle: Katherine Manners Villiers or Susan Villiers Fielding). Cary was at least nominally connected to the court, as her daughter Victoria was one of the first English maids to have the honour of serving the queen, and it was in the company of the queen that Cary made public her conversion. It was Cary's hope that the queen could also act as a champion for English Catholics by convincing Charles to protect them and charge their persecutors.

Cary almost erases Mortimer and concentrates on the queen acting on behalf of her kingdom and her son, as Edward abdicates his political responsibilities and begins to lose his hold on the nation, with his irresponsibility threatening his son's inheritance. By playing the destitute queen and sister she turns her connections into a strong army, and by using the image of the forlorn woman she enlists the support of Robert of Arthois, who offers her sanctuary in the German states; here she meets the Henault brothers, for whom she provides the damsel-in-distress quest an ideal knight needs. Her knowledge of how to convert women's resources into currency valid in the world of men is impressive, as Nelson emphasizes (2000:171-172).

Drayton, Marlowe and Hubert neutralize Isabel's political virility by bringing in the character of Mortimer, but in Cary's history Isabel enjoys full agency: she chooses Mortimer and the act is seen as a rightful response to the King's marginalization of her, both sexually and politically, and to his transgression, so that in Cary's version her adultery is in fact vindicated in the context of his far worse transgression. It is however in the episode of

Isabel's escape to France that Cary's text differs more radically – she shows her making a heroic escape, particularly from the clutches of the Spencers. The power and fortitude of Isabel abroad is not paralleled in any other source. She is thrust to the foreground of the history and is no longer portrayed as an appendage to Edward, as her role in the journey to France had been in Marlowe and Daniel, who say she is sent there by Edward to ease relations between the two countries. In Cary's story her leaving means acting on her own accord; it is her initiative. In her negotiations with Charles IV, her brother, she heeds no advice from her male company, even Mortimer, but shapes her own destiny and that of her son. She appears vengeful in the killing of Spencer and his father, but in the more serious business of regicide she claims the kind of 'innocence' that Elizabeth I claimed in the death of Mary Stuart. In general terms, she agrees with the need for it, as Elizabeth I had done, but Mortimer carries out the act so that her reputation remains intact. The respect in which Henault, Robert d'Artois and Charles IV hold her is unique to Cary's version of the history and so is the focus on Isabel's agency in her emotional and political acts: it is Isabel's army, it is her negotiations that finally lead to Edward's capitulation, and she is not incarcerated or turned against by Edward III, as happens in Drayton's and Marlowe's renditions of the history. She is excellent at reading people's perceptions and then acts accordingly. She manages to disguise her intentions in order to enact them, she knows how to use dissimulation in order to rule and outmanoeuvre her opponents (*Qui nescit dissimulare, nescit regnare*) – a suitable model for Henrietta, who needed to work on her diplomatic skills, as shown by the fact that in 1626, during Charles I's coronation, she had watched everything from a window and refused to participate because she wanted a Catholic bishop to crown her.

Isabel is also an example of how to use patronage and support networks effectively and thus serves as an excellent warning to Henrietta Maria, who continued to cultivate her French household instead of making overtures to the English court and building a network of support there. She seems to be saying that *potestas* (formal power) and *auctoritas* (informal power) have to join hands in a female leader's conduct; women's peace-making powers are to be seen as natural virtues that give women a very specific role in the body politic. Cary follows in the footsteps of Christine de Pizan by carving out a female body politic in her history of Edward II (Dască 2015:43-46). Again like Christine de Pizan, who, for all her staunch support of women's virtue and worth and her vitriolic attack on a century-long misogynist tradition, derived legitimacy for her revolutionary claims from a strongly conservative view of social roles for the two genders, Elizabeth Cary does not attempt to usurp men's roles and therefore does not make her Isabel confront the power system outright, as Henrietta rather tactlessly did in the first part of her reign by trying to convert Charles to Catholicism. The two authors' 'feminism' is that which Elaine Beilin describes in her study *Redeeming Eve*: "These women [writers], in keeping with their era, devoted themselves to regenerating the image of women in the familiar terms of their own culture, not to imagining or advocating a different society in which all women might change their ordained feminine nature for equality with men or public power." (Beilin 1987:xvii).

Conclusion

Defining literary texts by their author's biography problematizes the application of other critical approaches and compromises the possibility of the texts becoming subject to any new developments in literary criticism; it

leads to the 'closure of the text' (Hodgson-Wright 1998:62), making it, in Christiane Rochefort's memorable statement, a 'woman's book'.

Chris Weedon in her 1987 *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* defines the situation: "the study of women's writing as a feminist project can take many forms depending on the assumptions and perspectives of the reader. It is possible, for example, to look at it in both essentialist and poststructuralist ways and the key difference in these approaches is the significance given to women as authors. Essentialist approaches assume that female authorship of texts is their most crucial aspect and that they are the product of a specifically female experience and aesthetic. In poststructuralist theory authorship does not guarantee meaning, though the historical context in which the author is located will produce the discourses of the text. The forms of gendered subjectivity offered by texts are also the product of the social discourses on gender in circulation at the time of writing." (Weedon 1987:153).

Cary's work is extremely valuable in itself and instead of underlining in an exceptionalist vein the exoticism of her bold and adventurous biography and of her brave and uncompromising religious path, it would be far more productive and beneficial to consider the many literary and artistic merits of her work that make her such a strong candidate for canonical reinstatement. In Hodgson-Wright's memorable words, Elizabeth Cary's work can certainly do without the validation of her biography and whereas veneration of saints is part and parcel of Catholic doctrine "if Cary is similarly venerated by feminist literary critics the resulting canonization will mean that her texts remain permanently excommunicated from the rest of the Renaissance canon" (1998:64).

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