

## Note

### 'OPTIMI PICTORIS ARTIFICIO IN TABULA': ELIZABETH CARY'S BORROWING FROM BOCCACCIO'S *DE MULIERIBUS CLARIS* IN *THE TRAGEDY OF MARIAM*

In Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Mariam's mother, Alexandra, rhetorically asks her daughter:

And did not I to her [Felicity, the goddess of success] as  
presents send  
A table, that best art did beautify,  
Of two to whom heaven did best feature lend,  
To woo her love by winning Antony? (I.ii.85–88,  
italics mine)<sup>1</sup>

This question alludes to an anecdote in Cary's main source for the play, Thomas Lodge's English version of Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, which was included in Lodge's *The Famous and Memorable Works of Josephus* (1602). Alexandra, frustrated because Herod did not want to appoint her son, Aristobulus, high priest, asked for Antony's intercession and, considering the Roman general's notorious lust, sent him paintings of both her beautiful children. Cary extensively drew from *Antiquities* Book XV, where this anecdote is present in chapter II, narrating that Alexandra was persuaded to 'send the pictures of her two children to Antonius'.<sup>2</sup> Critics have often pointed out that *The Tragedy of Mariam* echoes its main source's 'verbal formulations at several points';<sup>3</sup> this, however, is evidently not the case for I.ii.85–88. Line I.ii.86, in particular, features words and details that are not present in Lodge's work. First, the choice of 'table' in place of 'pictures' is peculiar, to the extent that most modern editors of *The Tragedy of Mariam* feel the need to gloss the

word, explaining that it refers to a 'picture, portrait'<sup>4</sup> or 'a board on which portraits were painted'<sup>5</sup> in the footnotes. Second, in Cary's text, the double portrait sent to Antony is described as an excellent work of art, whereas no description is given in *Antiquities*.

Both 'table' and the relative clause describing it are plausibly not Cary's invention: they are also seen in a recounting of the same anecdote by Boccaccio in *De mulieribus claris* [*Famous Women*] (1361–1375), more specifically, in the chapter on Mariam, 'De Marianne Iudeorum regina, [Mariamme, Queen of Judaea]' which is immediately followed by a chapter on Cleopatra, 'De Cleopatra regina Egyptiorum [Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt]'.<sup>6</sup> Boccaccio reports that Alexandra sent 'amborum effigies optimi pictoris artificio in tabula delinitas, ad Antonium triumvirum [to the triumvir Antony ... portraits of her children painted on a panel by a skilled artist]' (italics mine).<sup>7</sup> Overall, Boccaccio's narrative does not add to the information provided by Lodge's Flavius Josephus, but details, as in *The Tragedy of Mariam* I.ii.86, the support ('tabula'/'table') of the double portrait and the exceptional artistry with which it was made ('optimi pictoris artificio'/'best art did beautify').

Boccaccio's collection of 106 biographies of famous women, including non-Christian ones, aimed to fill a gap in the literature that was predominantly about men and made a significant contribution 'to the controversy that raged over the merits and demerits of women'.<sup>8</sup> The work proved

<sup>4</sup> R. Wray (ed.), *The Tragedy of Mariam* by Elizabeth Cary (London, 2012), 91.

<sup>5</sup> S. J. Wright (ed.), *The Tragedy of Mariam. The Fair Queen of Jewry*, Renaissance Texts and Studies (Edinburgh, 1996), 44; see also B. Weller and M. W. Ferguson (eds.), *The Tragedy of Mariam. The Fair Queen of Jewry [...]* (Berkeley, California and London, 1994), 75; S. P. Ceresano and M. Wynne-Davies (eds.), *Renaissance Drama by Women: Texts and Documents* (London and New York, 1996), 188; C. Carroll (ed.) *William Shakespeare's The Tragedy of Othello [...]* and Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam, The Fair Queen of Jewry* (New York and London, 2003), 150.

<sup>6</sup> G. Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris*, edited by V. Zaccaria (Milano, 1967), 338, 344; *Famous Women*, translated by V. Brown (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003), 175, 178.

<sup>7</sup> G. Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris*, 340; *Famous Women*, 175.

<sup>8</sup> H. G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England: From Chaucer to Tennyson* (London, 2013), 35. On *De mulieribus claris* and contemporary politics, see Stephen Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women. Studies in Boccaccio's De mulieribus claris* (New York, 2003), 109–23.

<sup>1</sup> Edition used: R. Wray (ed.), *The Tragedy of Mariam* by Elizabeth Cary (London, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> F. Josephus, *The Famous and Memorable Workes*, translated by T. Lodge (printed at the charges of G. Bishop, S. Waterson, P. Short, and Tho. Adams, 1602), 384.

<sup>3</sup> R. Wray (ed.), *The Tragedy of Mariam* by Elizabeth Cary (London, 2012), 13. See also A.C. Dunstan (ed.), *The Tragedy of Mariam*, The Malone Society Reprints (1914), xiv–xv, and S. J. Wright (ed.), *The Tragedy of Mariam. The Fair Queen of Jewry*, Renaissance Texts and Studies (Edinburgh, 1996), 16.

controversial, however. Most famously, Christine de Pizan responded to Boccaccio's work in her *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405), a milestone in the *querelle des femmes*, where she 'vindicates women whose strengths Boccaccio has counterbalanced with vice and simply omits women characterized in *Famous Women* primarily by pride, greed, deceitfulness and sexual amorality.'<sup>9</sup> Perhaps predictably, Pizan's book excludes the story of Cleopatra but includes that of Mariam, where the term 'table' is also employed. Pizan's Middle French text reads: 'fu peinte la figure en un *table[ti]* et envoie au roy Anthoine d'Egypte'<sup>10</sup>, and Brian Ansley's English translation, published in 1521, reads: 'the figure of her was paynted in a *table* and sente to Kyng Anthony of Egypte' (italics mine).<sup>11</sup>

There are also striking similarities between the depiction of Mariam's death in Cary's play and the one found in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*. Mariam's 'scornful smile' (V.i.52) originates in Boccaccio's '*vilipensa morte* [scorning death]', and the detail that '*every eye was moist but Mariam's there*' (V.i.58), corresponds to Boccaccio's '*flentes ceteros, genis siccis*, aspiceret [she looked dry-eyed at the weeping bystanders]' (italics mine). Cary also draws upon Boccaccio for the description of Mariam's attitude towards death. The Italian author writes: '*integro vultus sui servato decore, nec ulla ex parte femineo ritu flexa ... uti in triumphum letissimum non solum intrepida sed aspectu alacri, ... iret in mortem* [she did not give way at all, as women are wont to do ... fearlessly, even eagerly, she went to her death as if to a joyful triumph]'. Cary's play reads: 'She came, *unmoved*, with pleasant *grace* – / As if to *triumph* her arrival were – / In stately habit and with *cheerful face*' (V.i.55–57, italics mine).<sup>12</sup> Cary demonstrably engages with Boccaccio's work and closely reflects his language, yet, tellingly, leaves out Boccaccio's remark on Mariam's exceptionality among the supposedly

weak female sex. Christina Luckyj is correct in noting that Cary's account of Mariam's death 'significantly complicates her source in Josephus.'<sup>13</sup> This paper demonstrates that such complexity is best understood in light of Cary's intertextual dialogue with Boccaccio's work.

Boccaccio's *De mulieribus* is not generally mentioned in studies of *The Tragedy of Mariam*; however, it was likely known and available to Cary, who could read Latin, French, and Italian, 'which she always understood very perfectly',<sup>14</sup> among other languages, according to her first biographer. Boccaccio's book circulated quite early in England: it has been identified as a possible source for Geoffrey Chaucer, John Lydgate, Edmund Spenser, William Painter, and Thomas Heywood. A Latin copy was owned by Humphrey of Gloucester, who donated it to Oxford in 1443, Sir Thomas Hoby bought Giuseppe Betussi's Italian version of the book, *Libro delle donne illustri* (1545), in 1554, and French versions circulated in manuscript. Moreover, in 1574, Thomas Salter included *De mulieribus* among the works he deemed appropriate for women readers.<sup>15</sup> There were also two English translations of some of the biographies. Neither of these contains the story of Mariam, but they do shed light on the politics of the book's reception. The first translation, into Middle English, is anonymous and is meant as a book for Christian women. Composed around 1440–1460, a copy was

<sup>13</sup> C. Luckyj, 'A moving Rhetoricke'. *Gender and Silence in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2002), 157.

<sup>14</sup> B. Weller and M. W. Ferguson (eds.), *The Tragedy of Mariam [...] with The Lady Falkland: Her Life by One of Her Daughters* (Berkeley, California and London, 1994), 186.

<sup>15</sup> H. G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England: From Chaucer to Tennyson* (London, 2013), 33–6. On Boccaccio's reception in England, see T. Pisanti, 'Boccaccio in Inghilterra tra Medioevo e Rinascimento', in G. Tournoy (ed.), *Boccaccio in Europe* (Leuven, 1977); J. Cowen, 'The Translation of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* in British Library MS and The Forty-Six Lives Translated from Boccaccio by Henry Parker, Lord Morley', *Notes and Queries*, 45.1 (1998), 28–9; J. Cowen, 'An English Reading of Boccaccio: A Selective Middle English Version of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* in British Library MS Additional 10304', in S. Powell and J. J. Smith (eds.), *New Perspectives on Middle English Texts: A Festschrift for R.A. Waldron* (Cambridge, 2000); J. Cowen 'Women's Wit in the Middle English Translation of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*: British Library MS Additional 10304', in C. J. Kay and L. M. Sylvester (eds.), *Lexis and Texts in Early English: Studies Presented to Jane Roberts* (Amsterdam, 2001); V. Cox, 'Boccaccio', in P. France (ed.), *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (Oxford, 2000), 473–4; H. G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England: From Chaucer to Tennyson* (London, 2013); G. Armstrong, *The English Boccaccio. A History in Books* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> M. Franklin, *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society* (London, 2017 [2006]), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ms. London, British Library Royal 19.A.xix (L), in C. de Pizan, *The Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes*, edited by H. Johnston (Tempe, Arizona, 2014), 298.

<sup>11</sup> C. de Pizan, *The Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes*, 299. Ansley's 1521 translation 'is the earliest surviving English translation of Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* and ... the only time that the work appeared in print in either France or England before the twentieth century' (ibid. xxiii).

<sup>12</sup> G. Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris*, 344; *Famous Women*, 177–8.

later owned by the aristocratic Elizabeth Savage, née Darcy (1581–1651), who held strong Catholic and royalist beliefs. The second translation was the work of Henry Parker, Lord Morley, who gave it to Henry VIII as a New Year's gift, likely in 1543, plausibly including Boccaccio's stories about chaste women as a legitimization of the execution of Catherine Howard, for adultery, and of Morley's own daughter, one of Catherine's ladies-in-waiting, for helping her in the alleged crime.<sup>16</sup> Assuming that Cary knew of the existence of these translations, especially the second one, she would likely have found them interesting, considering her own conversion to Catholicism, and the allusions to Henry VIII in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, as convincingly shown by Lisa Hopkins.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding print culture, the data obtained from book catalogues of Elizabethan private libraries are telling (PLRE.Folger). Books by 'Boccas' were owned by men and women belonging to different layers of society, including scholars, farmers, statesmen, physicians, landowners, and court officials. The Italian translation by Giuseppe Betussi was part of the 'italyon books' owned by William More (1520–1600), a landowner, administrator, and one of the major freeholders of the Blackfriars. The word 'table' is used in this rendering, which reads that the portraits were painted 'sopra una tavoletta da un eccellente dipintore' (italics mine).<sup>18</sup> One *Le vite d'elle donne Illustri* is included in the 1610 booklist of Sir Edward Conway (1564–1631), whom Cary knew and with whom she had epistolary exchanges during the years of her separation from her husband (EMLO. Bodleian). The book is unidentified, with the contributing editor specifying that '[p]ossibilities include works with this exact title by Tommaso Garzoni, Silvano Razzi, and Petruccio Ubaldini; additional works are possible if the entry is to any extent descriptive' (PLRE.Folger). An Italian

version of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus* could well be a possibility.<sup>19</sup>

By demonstrating the verbal agreements between *The Tragedy of Mariam* and Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, this article does not simply add another work to the list of sources of the play. Rather, it illuminates an overlooked dimension of Boccaccio's reception in early modern England: the findings presented here suggest that further investigation into the circulation and intertextual use of Boccaccio's text—particularly in relation to the English *querelle des femmes*—would prove especially fruitful. At the same time, this argument reframes our understanding of Cary's playwrighting and of her tragedy. Cary's engagement with Boccaccio reveals her methodical approach to history, based on consulting multiple narratives. Furthermore, in view of the gendered politics inherent in *De mulieribus claris* and in its reception history, recognizing Cary's use of this work as a source brings into focus her construction of Mariam as both the play's unequivocal protagonist and a model for women, deliberately set against the promiscuous Cleopatra, 'who can be contrasted with the heroine Mariam to facilitate her exculpation.'<sup>20</sup> Having also Boccaccio's Marianne in mind and, more importantly, the book that included it, Cary consciously inscribed her play within the broader *querelle des femmes* and provided a female dramatic version of the biography of the fair queen and the women's issues it implies.

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<sup>16</sup> G. Armstrong, *The English Boccaccio. A History in Books* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2013), 62–109.

<sup>17</sup> L. Hopkins, *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedy* (London, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> G. Betussi, *Libro di M. Gio. Boccaccio delle donne illustri* [...] (Venice, 1545), 109 verso.

<sup>19</sup> See S. Kolsky, *The Ghost of Boccaccio. Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy* (Turnhout, 2005) for further information on other collections of biographies of notable women produced in Italy during the 15th and 16th centuries.

<sup>20</sup> L. Hopkins, *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedy* (London, 2002), 153.

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