Refusing to Speak: Silent, Chaste, and Disobedient Female Subjects in *King Lear* and *The Tragedy of Mariam*

Elisa Oh

[Una] [w]ho in her selfe-resemblance well beseene,
Did seeme such, as she was, a goodly maiden Queene.
*The Faerie Queene* 1.12.8.8-9

I that do see me not I, Duessa am.
*The Faerie Queene* 1.5.26.6

For early modern audiences intentional female silence could be a sign of honest seeming or dishonest seeming; a chaste, obedient subject or an unchaste, resistant subject. By refusing patriarchal coercion to speak prescribed words or smile prescribed smiles, Cordelia in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Mariam in Elizabeth Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam* enact silences that construct a subject position that is separated from their political subjecthood. Though intended to represent rigorously defined feminine honesty, their silences in place of expected speech elicit competing interpretations of dishonesty and unchastity, and the conflicts over the meaning of these silences catalyze the tragic plots that follow. Most likely created within three or four years of each other, Cordelia and Mariam insist on an absolute honesty or “chastity” of self-representation, which requires politically dangerous disobedience.¹ The struggle to define these characters’ silences arises from the differences between two coexisting early modern concepts of the female subject, one of which is honest, chaste, and materially representable in the body and its garments; and the other of which is dishonest, unchaste, and invisible to all except a few initiated “readers.”

Neither character’s silence is absolute; rather, these silences are defined and defended in words. For the purposes of this essay, silence is defined as an absence of spoken words in a social context of expected speech, not as an absolute void. Characters in these two plays, including the “silent” woman herself, argue about the meaning of this verbal withholding and, in this way, construct the refusal to speak as a discursive

*EIRC* 34.2 (Winter 2008): 185-216
strategy that participates in competing early modern discourses of gender, rebellion, and submission. As Christina Luckyj has argued, early modern literary silences are multivalent signs that can encompass more than one meaning and often become sites of conflict between different cultural discourses. For female characters, silence is a social sign inevitably fraught with connotations of gendered virtue, but Cordelia's calculated refusal to speak and Mariam's unwelcoming silent demeanor simultaneously express ideal honesty and overt disobedience. In 1.1 of Lear, Cordelia resists the pressure to flatter her king and father when he commands it and chooses instead a principled silence to represent her refusal to dissemble. At stake is her inheritance of a share of Lear's kingdom, but because she fails to convince Lear that her official silence still represents a loyal feminine subject, she loses both paternal affection and a queen's dowry. In contrast, Mariam jeopardizes her life by silently enacting and then explaining her loss of affection to Herod when he returns alive after a rumor that he was dead. Each character finds that emotionally wounding a doting father or husband—who is also her king—has dire political consequences because each woman's key act of disobedience causes her silence to be read not as evidence of visible feminine honesty but as proof of deceptive, unchaste disloyalty.

Dissident discourses present in any social matrix produce potential for change in the dominant ideology by stretching existing boundaries of what is "normal." Alan Sinfield characterizes these oppositional discourses as "faultlines," which comprise the conflicts and inconsistencies always present in the dominant discourse's attempts to sustain a uniform plausibility to its explanations for the "natural" existing social order (Faultlines 31-51). Cordelia and Mariam's conflicted silences lay bare a crucial faultline in the early modern dominant discourse of femininity: The culture produced in these two tragedies assumes that women should be honest, chaste, loyal subjects of patriarchy, whose inner sense of a self and political subject positions are always aligned and materially visible, but at the same time suspects that they are not consistently any of these things.

The characters Cordelia and Mariam are deeply invested in this dominant discourse of what a good female subject should be: honest, chaste, and unproblematically "readable" in her outward material self-representation. But then each play's chief representative of that patriarchal discourse suddenly commands them to be dishonest. Resisting these injunctions to dissemble—by refusing to speak—inscribes them in the negative part of that same dominant discourse, which suspects the existence of a rebellious feminine subject who is representationally, sexually,