

Authorship, Authority, and the Polemics of Rachel Speght and the Wife of Bath

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When Chaucer makes the Wife of Bath ask the famous question “Who painted the lion?,” he touches upon a question that lies at the core of the age-old controversy known as the *querelle des femmes*. For, much as the controversy is about the nature of woman, her role, and the proper conduct required of her, it is also about the right of speech and of representation. And those few women who did dare to speak out, or even take up pens in their hands, found themselves confronted with the vexing problem of having neither a discourse nor a literary tradition with and within which they could express and represent themselves as speaking subjects.

Chaucer, albeit a male author, seems to have understood this female predicament well when he created the Wife of Bath. The Wife’s claim to ground

her speech not on “auctoritee” but on “experience” is an attempt to find new means of authorizing herself as a speaking subject outside the male-controlled literary tradition and discourse. But ironically, as Jill Mann notes, “what comes out of the Wife’s mouth is not a naive attempt at an unprejudiced representation of ‘how women feel’, but rather the most extensive and unadulterated body of traditional anti-feminist commonplace in the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*” (70). By reiterating the age-old misogynist sentiments, the Wife shows that she is unable to escape the prison-house of male discourse, which renders ineffectual her defiant gesture of tearing up the book of wicked wives. Thus Elaine Hansen sees in the passage of the lion “the Wife’s actual failure of self-expression and empowerment through language . . . [which] is a symptom of the alleged impossibility of her speaking” (28). And not only does the Wife fail, but she also condemns herself in the process of speaking by becoming the very emblem of female garrulity and aggression that misogynist texts so universally denigrated.

The Wife’s attempt to acquire a subject position as a defender of women against misogyny is complicated by the fact that she is not a real speaking subject but a fictional creation of a male author. But what of the historical women who actually did speak up and took part in the *querelle*? Recently, much critical attention has been given to these early feminists, or proto-feminists, with rising interest in questions such as the significance of their emergence, conditions under which they wrote, and the nature of their feminist positions, and all this has given the Wife a new importance as, in Hansen’s words, “one of our earliest literary images of the female as verbal artist” (28). In fact, before her vivid and powerful presence, the real women writers, about whom very little is known, seem pale and shadowy. But what draws these women, real and fictional, together is that they found themselves in the same predicament of not

having a discourse at their disposal when they wanted to speak out. When Christine de Pisan writes in 1399, “if women had written these books [misogynist books], I know full well the subject would have been handled differently” (Blamires 283), she is echoing the Wife’s question about the lion. Pisan stands first in the emerging line of women writers who entered into the fray and took up their pens to defend their sex from the onslaught of misogyny. Joan Kelly sees this as a novel and significant development: “what is utterly novel about the *querelle des femmes* is that women seized on it to counter for themselves the misogynist voice of literate opinion on women’s inferiority,” she writes (11). But the more interesting and relevant questions that need to be answered are: Did their efforts meet with more success than the Wife’s? How did they justify their authorship and lend authority to their writings? To what strategies did they resort to combat misogyny? Rachel Speght’s polemical writings not only raise these questions but also lend an important insight into the ways women writers began to perceive themselves as speaking subjects and to forge a feminine perspective from which to combat misogyny in the *querelle*. In this paper, I wish to discuss Speght’s polemical writing *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (1617) within this context, and explore what authorship meant for women writing in the early modern period.

Rachel Speght’s *A Mouzell for Melastomus* is an extraordinary document in that it is the first such pamphlet published by a woman under her own name. The pamphlet was written in direct response to an earlier pamphlet that appeared in 1615 under the name of *The Arraignement of Lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women*. Although it was published under the pseudonym Thomas Tel-troth, the author soon became widely known as one Joseph Swetnam, a fencing master. Speght takes up her defense on two broad fronts, as is made clear in the title which reads: “A Mouzell for Melastomus, The

Cynicall Bayter of, and *foule mouthed Barker*¹⁾ against Evahs Sex: Or an Apologeticall Answere to *that Irreligious and Illiterate Pamphlet* made by”²⁾ She accuses Swetnam’s pamphlet of being “Irreligious and Illiterate,” the accusations that may seem to address two separate issues but which are one in Speght’s work. And of the two, Speght places greater emphasis on illiteracy. This emphasis is supported also by the main title of the pamphlet, which indicates that the controversy is a battle over words and the right of speech. A muzzle is a silencer and her words are to silence his “barking.”

In reducing his words to “barking,” Speght denies them any claim to rational speech and thus relegates Swetnam to the brute state. She goes on to play on this idea in her choice of the word “cynicall,” meaning “doglike,” a point that is taken up with relish by another even fiercer refutation, *The Worming of a Mad Dog* (1617),³⁾ that followed Speght’s response.

Having boldly reduced Swetnam’s words to incoherent barking in the title, Speght goes on in her preface to point out more specifically the faults she finds in her opponent’s work. Again the first point she makes is not about *what* he writes but *how* he writes, not so much about the matter as the manner: “you have used such irregularities touching concordance, and observed so disordered

1) A barker can also mean a “noisy assistant in an auction or show,” a meaning that dates from 1483.

2) The edition used in this paper is in *The Polemics and the Poems of Rachel Speght*, edited by Barbara K. Lewalski.

3) This is one of the three answers to Swetnam that appeared in swift succession. The title page carries the pseudonym Constantia Munda, who is thought to be a woman. She takes up the dog and the muzzle images and uses them in a harsher language, calling him a bloodhound and Cerberus foaming at the mouth whose black grinning mouth has been well muzzled by a “modest and powerful hand” (Henderson 253-54). The other answer, titled *Esther hath hanged Haman* (1617), is also thought to be by a woman and was published under the pseudonym Esther Sowernam, an obvious play on the name Swetnam.

a method, as I doubt not to tel you, that a very Accidence Schollar would have quite put you downe in both” (7). A little later, she continues this line of attack by accusing him of “hodge-podge of heathenish Sentences, Similies and Examples” (8). Speght’s concern with Swetnam’s style, however, is best seen in a separate section appended to the main body of her defense called “Certaine Quaeres to the bayter of Women.” That she should take pains to compose this in itself is an indication of the importance she attaches to the question of style. Again condemning his writing for being “without methode, irregular, without Grammaticall Concordance,” she calls it “a promiscuous mingle mangle” (31), which she can hardly condescend to answer at all. She then goes on to point out in great detail the stylistic infelicities, grammatical errors, illogicalities and absurdities found in the text. For example, in an entry on “page 11. line 8,” she accuses him of joining together “*Women* plural, and *shee* singular” (35) as a pointed example of his literary incompetence. She also takes this opportunity to call him an ass by spelling her “as” as “Asse,” thus satirically mimicking his illiteracy and showing herself in contrast to be supremely in control of her language. When Constantia Munda takes up her even more astringent defense, she continues Speght’s quarrel with Swetnam’s style: “I would make this excuse for you, but that the crabbedness of your style, the unsavory periods of your broken-winded sentences persuade your body to be of the same temper as your mind” (Henderson 252-53).

Speght and Munda’s charge of illiteracy, however, goes beyond what is merely literary. In a way that anticipates Swift and Pope’s war with Grub Street, Speght and Munda saw in bad writing moral, spiritual, and intellectual deformities. Barbara Lewalski describes Swetnam’s work as “a jumble of proverb lore, rowdy jokes, invective, authorities, anecdotes, and exempla about women’s lechery, vanity, shrewishness, and worthlessness, cobbled together

from the entire tradition of misogynist writing” (154). In its miscellaneous nature, verbal copiousness and a general lack of organization and restraint, the work indeed sounds Grubbian, justifying Speght’s own description of it as “a promiscuous mingle mangle.”

The parallel Speght draws between bad writing and moral chaos is enforced in the preface:

Your dealing wants so much discretion, that I doubt whether to bestow so good a name as the Dunce upon you: but Minority bids me keepe within my bounds; and therefore I onlie say unto you, that your corrupt Heart and railing Tongue, hath made you a fit scribe for the Divell. (7)

In contrast to his lack of discretion, his corrupt heart and unrestrained tongue, she will show herself to be rational and self-disciplined by keeping within bounds. True to this principle, the main body of Speght’s defense is distinguished by its lucidity and organization. She divides her defense into two parts: the first consists of her answers to the four major charges laid at woman’s door, and the second is her exposition of the excellence of woman organized along Aristotle’s four causes. In all her counter-arguments, she grounds herself firmly on the authority of the Bible. As many have observed,⁴⁾ there is little that is original in the main body of her arguments, and she does not even go so far as to challenge the notion that man is the head of woman and woman the weaker vessel.⁵⁾

What is original in her treatment of the controversy, however, is that she

4) See Lewalski and McManus.

5) “. . . Woman, who, excepting man, is the most excellent creature under the Canopie of heaven” (13); “. . . that Satan first assailed woman, because . . . she being the weaker vessel was with more facility to be seduced” (14).

makes a direct link between the intellectual and the moral. Swetnam is not only illiterate but also irreligious; he is not only ignorant but also immoral. Linda Woodbridge sees the formal controversy over woman in the Renaissance as a kind of literary game or exercise with its own set of rules and conventions, the contents of which should not be taken too seriously: “the formal debate about womankind was a prescribed exercise in medieval universities, a vehicle for acquiring and demonstrating logical and rhetorical skill” (5). Woodbridge therefore sees Speght’s objection to Swetnam’s work to be coming from his violation of the rules of the rhetorical game (91). But to Speght, literary incompetence signifies ignorance, which to her is a sin. She accuses him of irreligion, particularly of blasphemy, because his denigration of women is based on his misinterpretation and distortion of the Bible: “wresting and perverting everie place of Scripture,” she says (8).

In this way, Speght brings the question of knowledge into the very heart of her defense. In this, she also differs from her fictional counterpart, the Wife of Bath, whose imperfect knowledge of the authorities, both scriptural and classical, turns her into an object of irony. In the ease with which she handles her knowledge of the Bible and classical authors, in her mastery of the rhetorical devices, and in the clarity of her argument, Speght asserts her intellectual superiority over Swetnam. His stylistic imperfections, incoherent argument, and general ignorance expose him to be an unworthy opponent, and his venomous words therefore can only be silenced by a physical restraint, a muzzle.

The importance that Speght places on knowledge, which she sees as a cure for ignorance, could best be seen in a short poem called *The Dreame*. *The Dreame*, which prefixes the title poem in her volume of poetry called *Mortalities Memorandum* (1621), is a short allegory of the poet’s search of

knowledge. In a dream vision, the poet finds herself in a pleasant place called Cosmos, but she is desolate. She is approached by Thought, to whom she reveals the cause of her grief to be ignorance and laments: “My grief, quoth I, is called Ignorance, / Which makes me differ little from a brute” (43-44). For Speght, the most serious consequence of ignorance is moral blindness: “I hungry am, yet cannot seeke for foode; / Because I know not what is bad or good” (53-54). She then goes on to define the shortcomings more specifically:

And sometimes when I seeke the golden meane,
 My weaknesse makes me faile of mine intent,
 That suddenly I fall into extremes,
 Nor can I see a mischief to prevent
 But feel the paine when I the peril finde,
 Because my maladie doth make me blinde. (55-60)

Intemperance could be termed a moral fault, but Speght sees this as leading to blindness, an inability to see, which is an intellectual shortcoming. The natural consequence of this, as she goes on to show, is narrow self-centred thinking and solipsism, which prevent one from achieving a broader outlook:

What is without the compasse of my braine,
 My sicknesse makes me say it cannot bee;
 What I conceive not, cannot come to pass
 Because for it I can no reason see.
 I measure all mens feet by mine owne shooe,
 And count all well, which I appoint or doe. (61-66)

When these stanzas are read within the context of *A Mouzell*, it becomes clear that these are precisely the faults that may be found in Swetnam's writing. The

unrestrained manner in which he writes and his inability to see beyond the stereotyped image of woman created by misogyny all point him to be suffering from Ignorance. To Speght, however, ignorance leads to something worse. It leads to irreligion: “Who wanteth *Knowledge* is a Scripture foole” (211) she writes. Swetnam’s misinterpretation of the Bible is thus a natural consequence of his ignorance and his *Arraignment* is, therefore, insulting to both God and women. By this neat strategy, Speght joins the cause of religion and feminism.

In the ensuing stanzas, the poet goes off in search of Knowledge, whom she finds in the garden of Erudition. In this, Speght lays claim to the necessity of women’s education. But she is discouraged by Dissuasion, who reminds her of the difficulties in her path, such as her dullness, defective memory, lack of time, and her sex (107-9). At this point Desire, Truth, and Industrie come to her rescue and embark on an apology that argues strongly in favour of women’s education, and the poet is told that to covet knowledge is “a lawfull avarice” (231). By legitimizing woman’s desire for knowledge, Speght rewrites the story of the Fall, and creates, in Elaine Beilin’s words, “a counter-Eden where she partakes . . . of ‘good’ knowledge, the very knowledge . . . by which God confers essential humanity” (113). If knowledge confers humanity on man, then ignorance must deprive man of it. At this point in a flawlessly smooth transition, Speght introduces Swetnam into the poem:

But by the way I saw a full fed Beast,
Which roared like some monster, or a Devill,
And on *Eves* sex he foamed filthie froth,
As if that he had had the falling evill;
To whom I went to free them from mishaps,
And with a *Mouzel* sought to bind his chaps. (241-46)

Speght claims that this brutish image is of Swetnam's own making. In her dedicatory address to *A Mouzell*, she asks the reader to consider of him "according to the portraiture which he hath drawne of himself, his Writings being the very embleme of a monster" (4). In other words, words reveal a man to be what he is, and through his bad writing, Swetnam incriminates himself morally, intellectually, and as a writer. This is very much the technique that Chaucer uses in his treatment of the Wife of Bath. The Wife in what she says may be espousing the woman's cause, but in the very act of making her defense and in her manner of doing it, she does disservice to her cause by becoming the very emblem of all that the dominant culture considers monstrous in woman.

If *The Arraignment* reveals Swetnam to be a monster, Speght's writing reveals her to be his opposite. In the same sentence in which she calls him a monster, she asks women to regard her own manner of dealing with Swetnam "a paradigmatical patterne for all women, noble and ignoble to follow, that they be not enflamed with choler against this our enraged adversarie, but patiently consider him" (4). In thus pitting her style against his, her stance of patience and restraint against his rage and excess, Speght creates a self and an authorial presence that are diametrically opposed to the monstrous image of the opponent that she has created. The portrait that she draws of herself is as a sober, learned, and above all rational being. She confesses to her youth and inexperience, modestly apologizing for her "imperfection both in learning and age" (5). But as Barbara Lewalski astutely observes, this has a subversive subtext: "if Rachel's 'vacant houres' of study have made her so much more learned than Swetnam with his supposed masculine advantage, then her example makes the case for women's equal intelligence and equal capacity for education" (163). At every opportunity, both directly and obliquely, Speght asserts her own

superiority over Swetnam and invites the readers to join her by appealing to their better judgement: "I doubt not but the Judicious will account you according to your demerit; As for the Vulgar sort, which have no more learning then you have shewed in your Booke, it is likely they will applaud you for your paines" (8). In this way, she discriminates the select few, what she calls the judicious, from the vulgar majority. Moreover, she makes an appeal to "all virtuous Ladies Honourable or Worshipfull, and to all other of Hevahs sex fearing God . . ." (3). In this Speght, as her contemporary poet Aemilia Lanyer had done,⁶) strategically addresses herself to a community of good women whose virtues outshine those of men.⁷) She thus presents herself, despite her youth and inexperience, as "a chivalrous champion of women" (McManus 198) who has successfully wrested from the male hand the discourse of misogyny, which she then goes on to use against them. The authorial presence thus created is an empowered one that can impose silence on an opponent who has been reduced to being no more than a mad dog.

Speght's works show the power of words and the power that one can acquire in mastering words. As a verbal artist, Chaucer's Wife understands well that the battle of the sexes is one of words, the question of who controls the language. The Wife thinks she gets the better of her husbands in this battle: "I ne owe hem nat a word that it nys quit" (425). But vociferous though she is, the Wife loses out ultimately, and her words are rendered powerless as she

6) Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is distinguished by the number of dedicatees it addresses, all of whom are female. Although most of Lanyer's dedicatees are high-born, she makes a special address to all virtuous ladies.

7) Lanyer pits a community of good women who suffered with Christ in his Passion as opposed to men who condemned him to death. Lanyer makes a special point of this by accusing men of having committed a greater sin than Eve in their having sent Christ to his death ("*Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*" 809-32).

herself becomes the object of satire. She does not succeed in overcoming the stigma attached to the image of the woman who speaks out. If the dominant culture of the early modern period condemned talking women, it doubly condemned women who took to writing and publishing. This was particularly so as printed words still had to struggle against the stigma attached to it.⁸⁾ As Wendy Wall argues, in a culture that privileged manuscripts, not even male writers were exempt from the stigma of print, which was often associated with being lower class and promiscuous. But the difficulty was even worse for women: “the female writer could become ‘fallen’ woman in a double sense: branded as a harlot or a member of the non-elite” (Wall 281). This association of writing / speaking and promiscuity is something that Chaucer seems to have understood well, for one of the most powerful images of an outspoken woman is also that of a sexually voracious one. Women writing in the early modern period had to fight against this conflated image of the chatterbox and a whore. Seen against this light, Speght’s self-representation as a sober and eminently rational persona seems to have been a judicious one. Linda Woodbridge sees this stance as a well-chosen strategy for disarming her opponent (88). The rhetorical advantage, however, is not the only one aimed for. The reality of the hostility that her polemical writing probably provoked should not be underestimated. What she as a female writer was up against could best be seen in the manuscript annotations found in a contemporary copy of *A Mouzell*.⁹⁾ The annotations are illuminating in providing an insight into the contemporary—probably male—response to Speght’s writing and in highlighting precisely those

8) See Wendy Wall’s introductory chapter to *The Imprint of Gender*.

9) This was discovered by Lewalski in the Beinecke Library at Yale. The owner of the copy is not known, but Lewalski considers the possibility of Swetnam being its owner. (See the introduction to her edition of Speght (1993)).

areas of vulnerability that women writers were exposed to.

What is remarkable about the annotations is the openly sexual remarks on Speght's person and writing made by the annotator who, as Cis van Heertum remarks, could have found the work "rather titillating" (492). The annotator also makes several jeering remarks that she is out to get a husband (101)¹⁰ and even uses obscenities on occasion.¹¹ He also picks up the association between sexual promiscuity and publishing: she is "by reason of our publique booke, not soe good as common" (95).

It is against this kind of attitude that we must understand Speght's polemical writings. What they attest to is not only her intelligence but also her courage, the courage not just to speak out but also to publish under her own name. Esther Sowernam may have found Speght's work "slender" (Henderson 219), and Munda's response may be more astringent, but these women, if they were women in truth, did not have the courage to come out openly to fight back. Christine de Pisan in her *Cities of Ladies* had done so, and Chaucer created in the Wife of Bath a woman who attempted to do so. There is a wide gulf that separates the male-authored, ironized fictitious Wife of Bath and the historical woman Rachel Speght, but they have this in common, that they dared to meet misogyny head on and spoke out fearlessly. They both revealed that the control of words could be wrested from the male hand and put to use for female empowerment. Speght set an early example of how this could be done, and by doing so encouraged succeeding women writers to take the thorny path of publishing.

10) See the Appendix in Lewalski's edition of Speght's works. Page references are taken from Lewalski's edition.

11) An example of this would be: "Doth she fight for her Cunt-rie" (97).

주제어: 스페이트, 여성논쟁, 여성혐오, 바스의 여장부, 문맹, 스위트남

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Authorship, Authority, and the Polemics of Rachel Speght and the Wife of Bath

Abstract

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Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Rachel Speght are both women who spoke out against misogyny in the *querelle des femmes*. Although the former was a fictional creation of a male author and the latter a historical woman, they had this in common: they both understood the power of language and that controlling it could be empowering. In her refutation of a contemporary attack on women by Joseph Swetnam, Speght draws up her line of defense on two fronts: illiteracy and irreligion, which she sees as being mutually connected. She exposes in *A Mouzell for Melastomus* how Swetnam's stylistic inadequacies and lack of command over language are symptomatic of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual inferiority. In contrast, by showing her knowledge of the Bible and classical authors, and of rhetoric and an ability to argue logically, she shows herself to be intellectually and morally superior to Swetnam, whom she reduces to being a brute. Through such strategies, she creates an authorial presence that justifies female authorship in a manner that could serve as a model for succeeding generations of women writers in the early modern period.

Key Words

Speght, *querelle des femmes*, misogyny, Wife of Bath, illiteracy, Swetnam.