

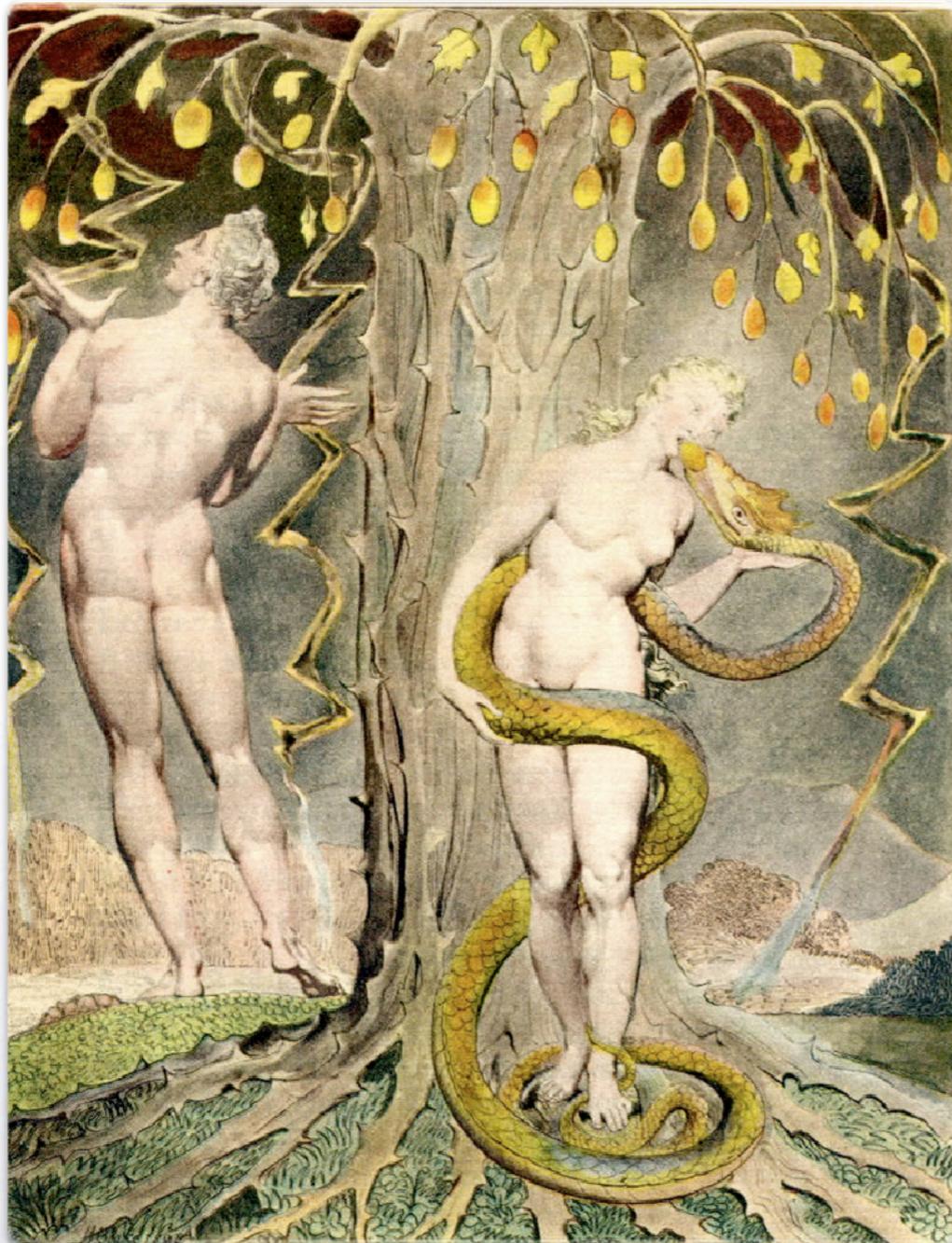


The Nature of (Wo)men: Gender and Controversy in 17th Century England



The “debate about women” in Early Modern England⁽¹⁾

- 1589 - Jane Anger, *Her Protection for Women . . .*
- 1611 - Amelia Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Juadeorum*
- 1613 - Lady Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam, The Fair Queen of Jewry*
- 1615 - Joeshph Swetnam, *The Arraignment of Lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant women . . .*
- 1617 - Rachel Speght, *A Mouzell for Melastomus*
- 1617 - Esther Sowernam, *Esther hath hanged Haman . . .*
- 1617 - Constantia Munda, *The Worming of a Mad Dog . . .*
- 1620 - Anonymous, *Hic Mulier*
- 1620 - Anonymous, *Haec Vir*



What was the Debate about Women (the *querelle des femmes*)?

The late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century debate about women in England was part of a much older debate that reached back to--at the very least--the Adam and Eve narrative in Genesis.

And the woman said vnto the serpent, We eate of the fruite of the trees of the garden, But of the fruite of the tree which is in the middes of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eate of it, neither shall ye touche it, lest ye die. Then the serpent said to the woman, Ye shall not die at all, But God doeth knowe, that when ye shall eate thereof, your eyes shall be opened, knowing good and euill. So the woman (seeing that the tree was good for meate, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to get knowledge) tooke of the fruite thereof, and did eate, & gaue also to her husband with her, and he did eate. Then the eyes of them both were opened, and they knewe that they were naked, and they sewed figge tree leaues together, and made them selues breeches. Afterward they heard the voyce of the Lord God walking in the garden in the coole of the day, and the man & his wife hid themselues from the presence of the Lorde God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said vnto him, Where art thou? Who saide, I heard thy voyce in the garden, and was afraide: because I was naked, therefore I hid my selfe. And he saide, Who tolde thee, that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eate? Then the man saide, The woman which thou gauest to be with me, she gaue me of the tree, and I did eate. (Gen 3: 2-12)⁽²⁾

While the story of the fall served as a kind of polemical starting point, it was only a starting point for a much larger debate.



Querelle? (continued)

The *querelle des femmes* flared up in England following a number of translations of Henricus Cornelius Agrippa's 1529 *De nobilitate et praecellencia foeminei sexus* (On the nobility and preeminence of women). In addition to the Eve debate, the *querelle des femmes* in England was concerned with a series of epistemological questions.

As we saw in the reading for today, there were deep seated concerns about women's nature in early modern England. Women were seen as uncontrollable, unknowable, and hysterical (a word derived from female biology). However, before we turn to the texts that we all read for today, it is important to have a little better understanding of these general ideas.

During the period in question, women were to be chaste, silent and obedient--the triad of virtues referred to in your anthology (B: 1537). This ideological structure forced women into a problematic double-bind. If women complied, there was little room for them to explore their own views of experience or identity (we have the texts we do precisely because some women did not comply). At the same time, to resist this powerful ideal was to set oneself up for scorn.

In addition, Women's bodies were cast as problematic sites. While we do not get a very good sense of this from the excerpted texts in the anthology, it is nonetheless important to note that there is an active dialogue in the period that sees the female body as corrupt, as a "painted sepulcher." There was a tendency in early modern England (and on the continent) to view women as beautiful on the exterior but corrupt or rotting below the surface. We have seen one manifestation of this fear already in the misshapen neither parts of Duessa in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and we wouldn't have to look too far for another...





SALVE DEVS REX IVDÆORVM.

Containing,

- 1 The Passion of Christ.
- 2 Eues Apologie in defence of Women.
- 3 The Teares of the Daughters of Ierusalem.
- 4 The Salutation and Sorrow of the Virgine Marie.

With diuers other things not vnfit to be read.

Written by Mistris *Amelia Lanyer*, Wife to Captaine
Alfonso Lanyer Seruant to the
Kings Majestie.



AT LONDON

Printed by *Valentine Simmes* for *Richard Bonian*, and are
to be sold at his Shop in Paules Churchyard, at the
Signe of the Floure de Luce and
Crown. 1611.

Amelia Lanyer: *Salve Deus Rex Judæorivm*

Amelia Lanyer's poetry is a good place to begin our discussion of the debate about women in early modern England. While generally not considered part of the *querelle* proper, Lanyer's poetry is concerned with many of the issues that are central to the larger debate.

Lanyer prefaces the title poem of her *Salve Deus* with a series of dedicatory poems. You have an excerpt of one of those poems, "To the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty," in your text. In this poem, Lanyer outlines her intent to write "fair Eve's apology" (B: 1315), despite the possible shortcomings of her own "weak distempered brain and feeble spirits" (B:1315). This is in part an invocation of the *humilitas topos*, but if we continue on with Lanyer, it is a more profound move as well.

Elsewhere in "To the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty" (lines 37-61) Lanyer subtly likens herself and her frailty/humility to Christ. This move is indicative of what Lanyer is doing in the poem. In the self-identification with Christ's humble state, Lanyer is taking what is perhaps her greatest liability in the period--her female nature--and associating it with a source of power and authority.

Having done this in the dedicatory poems, the tone is set, and Lanyer's defense of Eve will build on this notion of women that subverts tendencies to blame Eve's weakness. Rather than see Eve's humanity as weak, the logic of the poem(s) allows us to see Eve's humanity as something more profound. Eve is by virtue of her humanity both fallible and Christlike.



Lanyer (continued)

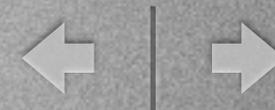
*Till now your indiscretion sets us free.
And makes our former fault much less appear;
our mother Eve, who tasted of the tree,
Giving to Adam what she held most dear, 20
Was simply good, and had no power to see;
The after-coming harm did not appear:
The subtle serpent that our sex betrayed
Before our fall so sure a plot had laid.*

...
*If Eve did err, it was for knowledge sake;
The fruit being fair persuaded him to fall:
No subtle serpent's falsehood did betray him: 55
If he would eat, who had power to stay him?*

It is possible to misread these lines as expressing women's weakness, but that is certainly not what Lanyer is getting at. Rather, the thrust of the passage is an association of Eve's humanity with the crucified body of Christ (an image we do not get to see in our excerpts, but which is central to the poem as indicated by the title). Human frailty, and in particular female frailty, are a means of participation in Christ's passion and death.

Lanyer reworks tradition--a tradition that has been hostile to Eve and to women. Her version of the Genesis story rethinks Eve's culpability, and forces us to ask some critical questions about the why it is she was blamed in the first place.





THE
TRAGEDIE
OF MARIAM,
THE FAIRE
Queene of Iewry.

Written by that learned,
vertuous, and truly noble Ladie,
E. C.



LONDON.
Printed by Thomas Creede, for Richard
Hawkins, and are to be sold at his shoppe
in Chancery Lane, neere vnto
Sargents Inne.

Lady Elizabeth Cary: *The Tragedie of Mariam, The Faire Queene of Jewry*

Cary has been time and again misrepresented (I think), as presenting a conflicted view on women in her *Tragedy of Mariam*. This is something that we will understand if we take a closer look at the text.

The heroine of the play--if there is such a thing in Cary's somewhat bleak view--is like everyone else subject to the uncertainties for the world around her. When we first encounter Mariam (at least the first time we encounter her in our selections), her world is about to come crashing down.

MARIAM. *Oh, what of Herod?*

SOHEMUS.

Herod lives.

5

[MARIAM]. *How! Lives? What, in some cave or forest hid?*

SOHEMUS. *Nay, back returned with honor. Caesar gives
 Him greater grace than e'er Anthonius did.*

Confronted with this brutal reality, Mariam is forced back into a relationship that she has forsworn, with a man she does not love and who is the murderer of members of her family. This is a situation that will eventually lead to her death. It is in this context that we are asked to read the chorus.

That wife her hand against her fame doth rear,

That more than to her lord alone will give

110

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 honor, thou she kills it not.



Cary (continued)

*No sure, their thoughts more can be their own,
And therefore should to none but one be known.* 120

While the chorus (which acts as a kind of commentary at the end of each act) seems to suggest capitulation, we are probably better to read this “with a grain of salt.” In the selection from 4.8 we do see Mariam in a sense blaming herself:

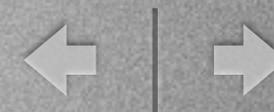
*Had not myself against myself conspired,
No plot no adversary from without* 10
Could Herod's love from Mariam have retired.

But more compelling is her sustained defiance. At the end of Mariam's long speech is a kind of self-affirmation:

*That I was ever innocent, though sour:
And therefore can they but my life destroy,* 45
*My soul is free from adversary's power.
You princes great in power, and high in birth,
Be great and high, I envy not your hap.
Your birth must be from dust, your power on earth;
In heav'n shall Mariam sit in Sara's lap.* 50

Mariam's words here suggest that, whatever her adversary's may think of her and however powerful they may be, she will stand by in her innocence. This what got her into trouble in the first place; she was a confident woman that Heriod desired sexually but feared intellectually and politically. At the same time, it is the source of her power as a woman and the source of Mariam's, and Cary's, critique of culture and marriage. Like Lanyer, Cary suggests that it is necessary to break free from the prescribed bounds of society, and that in doing so there may be costs but also benefits.





THE
ARAIGNMENT

Of Lewde, idle, froward, and vncon-
stant women: Or the vanitie of them,
choofe you whether.

With a Commendacion of wife, vertuous and
and honeft Women.

Pleasant for married Men, profitable for
young Men, and hurtfull
to none.



LONDON

Printed by Edw: Ailde for Thomas Archer, and are to be folde at his shop
in Popes-head Pallace nere the Royall Exchange.

1615.

Joseph Swetnam: *The Araignment of lewde, idle, froward and unconstant women . . .*

Swetnam is the sole male author in today's reading cluster (but certainly not the only male author in the larger debate. We have already seen in Cary and Lanyer a critical engagement with some of the issues that are circulating in the period. In Swetnam we can see these concerns expressed more directly (but perhaps not more clearly/logically). Swetnam addresses himself to,

*neither the wisest clerk, nor to the starkest fool, but unto the
ordinary sort of giddy-headed young men. (B: 1544).*

In doing so he attempts to identify himself as a kind of intellectual everyman--a voice for common people. And so we ask a question, to what extent does Swetnam represent his contemporaries? (If Cary, Lanyer and Speght are any indication, perhaps Swetnam is all too representative, but let's not push that too far.) Swetnam seems quite confident in his representation of the "bearbaiting of women" (B: 1544). The image he paints is one in which women are animalistic (the complete text of Swetnam's *Araignment* is rife with animal imagery) and unpredictable.

Swetnam brings to bear, or attempts to bring to bear a number of classical and biblical allusions:

*for I know women will bark more at me than Cerberus the two-headed dog
did at Hercules . . . [Moses] also says that [women] were made of the rib of
a man, and that their froward nature shows; for a rib is a crooked thing, good
for nothing else, and women are crooked by nature (B: 1544-45)*



Swetnam (continued)

It can be hard, as Speght points out, to get a handle on Swetnam's accusations. Just what is he implying in his tract? What does he mean when he says that women are "lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant"? It seems that at the base of Swetnam's diatribe is a concern that women will be active agents in the world.

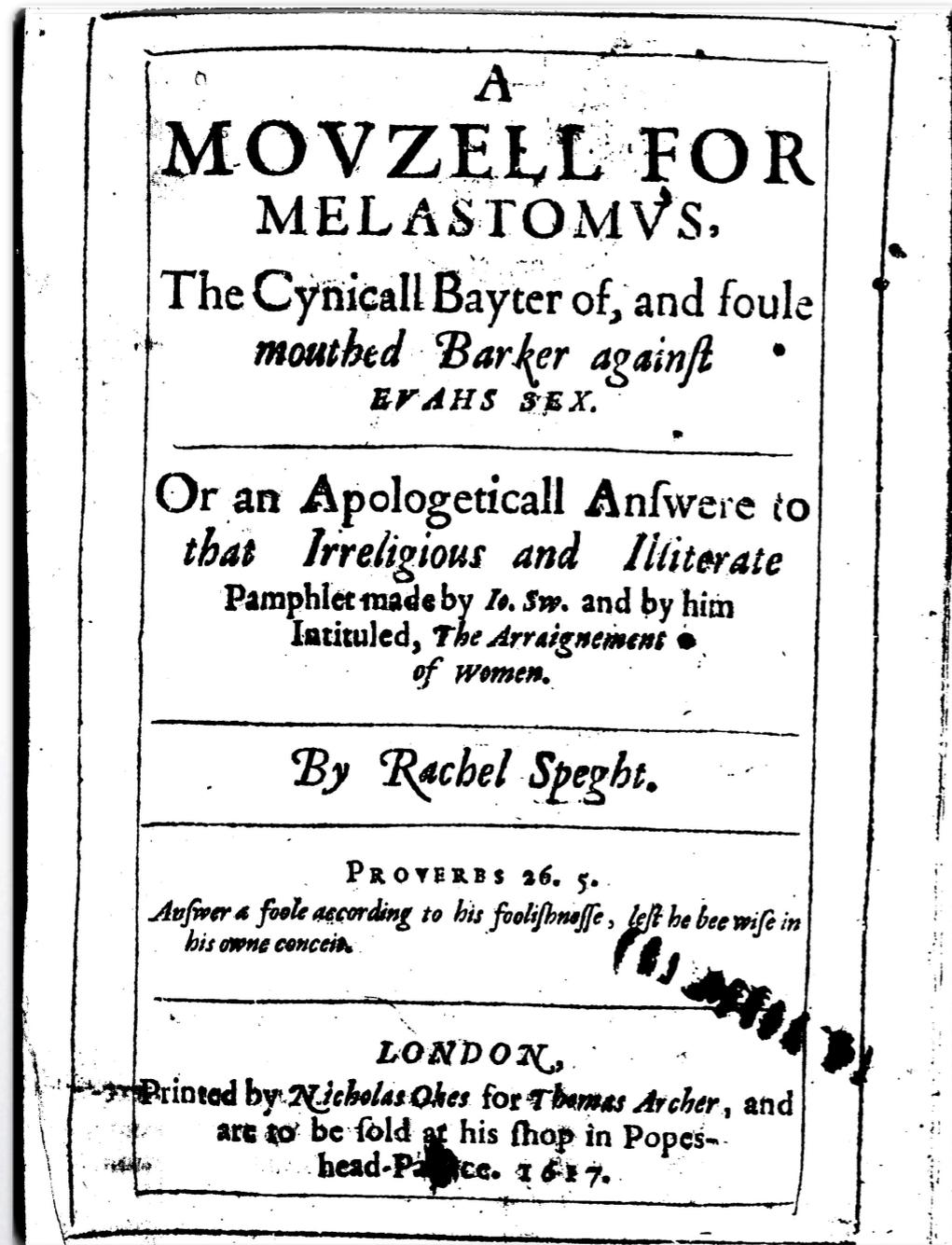
In his rant against "fair women" (B: 1546), Swetnam keys us in to one of his central concerns. Women and women's bodies are uncontrollable:

He that has a fair wife and a whetstone, everyone will be whetting thereon. and a castle is hard to keep when it is assaulted by many, and fair women are commonly caught at. He that marries a fair woman, everyone will wish his death to enjoy her. (B: 1546)

The fear in these lines is a fear of losing control. The dangerous thing about women, Swetnam seems to say, is that they ultimately are beyond the control of men. Women are valued as objects of desire, but this enters them into a common visual economy. And, as Swetnam implies that women are fickle and untrustworthy, they cannot be counted on to resist when they are presented with temptations that might arise from their introduction into that world.

In Swetnam's *Araignment*, women are that which is desired in common--that which is consequently desirable and frightening. Their bodies are a potential source of pleasure and an inevitable site of anxiety. Constant fears of disloyalty and performance spawn this limited understanding of the nature of women.





Rachel Speght: A Mouzell for Melastomus

We turn at last to Speght's response to Swetnam, her *Mouzell for Melastomus*. As was noted in your anthology, Speght is one of several known responses to Swetnam, and the only response for which we are certain of the author.

In contrast to Swetnam's work, Speght's response is learned and articulate (try diagramming a sentence from each!). While Speght conceives of the *Mouzell* as a response, it is not limited by this culture of response. Rather, Speght's intellectual inventiveness is a testament to what she claims for women--what Swetnam had sought to deny.

Speght's discussion of women in light of the Aristotelean causes is indicative of her claims. In the following passage she claims reason and a clear place in divine *telos* for women by appeal to Aristotle's causes:

The efficient cause of women's creation was Jehovah the Eternal, the truth of which is manifest in Moses his narration of the six days work . . . the material cause, or matter whereof woman was made, was of a refined mold . . . For man was created of the dust of the earth, but woman was made of a part of man, after that he was a living soul . . . Thirdly, the formal cause, fashion, and proportion of a woman was excellent. For she was neither like the beasts of the earth, fowls of the air, fishes of the sea, or any other inferior creature, but man was the only object which she did resemble. . . . Fourthly and lastly, the final cause or end, for which woman was made, was to glorify God, and to be



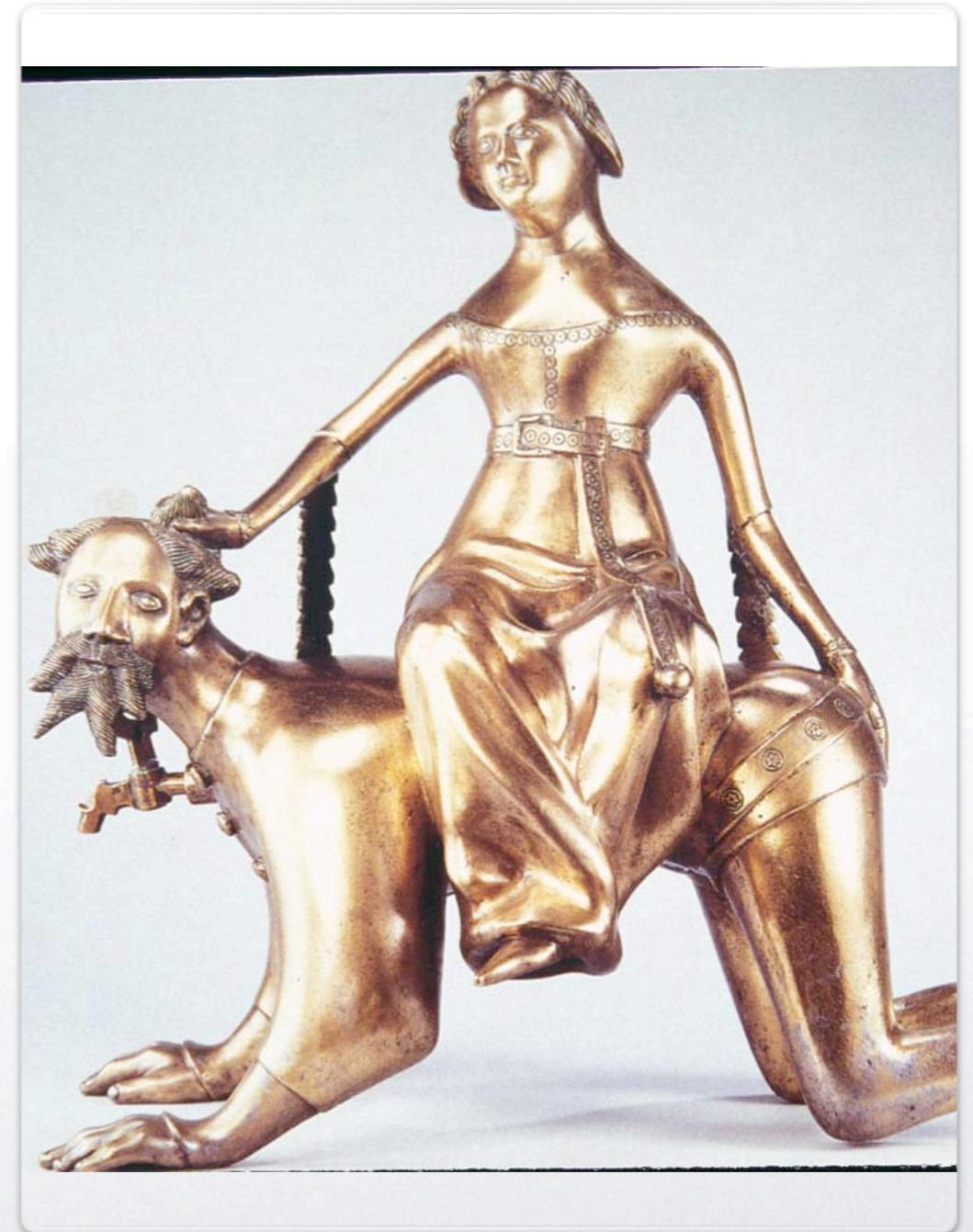
Speght (continued)

a collateral companion for man to glorify God in using her body ad all the parts, powers, and faculties thereof, as instruments for his honor. (B: 1548)

Speght clearly subsumes a classical framework to her defense of women. This mastery of Aristotle evinces both a learned background and creativeness. At the same time, it threatens to reinforce the fears about women in the minds of the ignorant. Like those before her, Speght's willingness to speak makes her a potential target for further attacks against women; her defense is paradoxically fodder for the canons as she contributes to anxieties already circulating.

This is not in any way to suggest that Speght or her contemporaries should have remained silent. Rather, it is important to notice the ways in which even an articulate response such as Speght's can be misconstrued as somehow threatening to the *status quo* (or perhaps rightly construed as threatening to a *status quo* sorely in need of change).

Perhaps Cary, Lanyer, and Speght are telling us to question authority; maybe they are kindred spirits to Dr. Ulrich...





HIC·MVLIER;

OR,

The Man-Woman:

Being a Medicine to cure the Coltish Disease o
the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminine's
of our Times.

Express in a briefe Declamation.

Non omnes possumus omnes.

Mistis, will you be trim'd or truss'd?



HÆC·VIR;

OR

The Womanish-Man:

Being an Answer to a late Booke intituled
Hic-Mulier.

Express in a briefe Dialogue betweene *Hæc-*
Vir the Womanish-Man, and *Hic-Mulier* the
Man-Woman.



London printed for J.T. and are to be sold at Christ Church gate. 1620.



Notes

1. For a great resource on the “woman controversy” in early modern England see this [website](#). Both full text and facsimile versions of *Mariam, Araignment, and Mouzzel* are available online at [EEBO](#).
2. This quotation is taken from the Geneva Bible (1587), which is available online in searchable form at the [Bible in English](#).