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AUTHOR Combs, Debra
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ABSTRACT

Rachel Speght, a London (England) minister's daughter, was not yet 20 years old when she wrote her first pamphlet. In it and her other works, she attempted to transcend patriarchal discourses that sought to both define her identity and determine the limits of her rhetorical situation. Women's ontological status, as derived from orthodox Renaissance Protestantism and as expressed in Speght's pamphlet and elsewhere, delineated the behaviors considered ethical for women. Early modern beliefs about gender decorum defined women's primary tropes and relegated women's work to the preservation of men's acquisitions. Women were to be ensconced "safely" at home--specifically discouraged from tapping into the newly popular channel of print. Women were "written upon" by the oral text of the community's gossip about them. Within such constraints, Rachel Speght's voice subversively constructed her identity as a good, yet individuated, woman. Her obedience in her ethos resulted, in part, from her use of her sources: Much of Speght's work relies on Biblical material, Saints' lives, and Christian doctrine for evidence. Speght argues repeatedly for a redefinition of women's essential nature by shifting the Bible's negative, essentializing statements about the nature of women to situated statements about women and men in historical time. Her attempt to transcend her rhetorical situation can teach students much about how feminism can function outside of modern and post-modern expectations and about how the character of the speaker, her culture, and her words can merge to create an empowered, individuated ethos. (Contains 14 references.) (NKA)

CCCC '96 Paper

Dr. Debra Combs

Southern Methodist University

Transcending the Rhetorical Situation:

Ethos and Rachel Speght

Unlike my colleagues on this panel, who have available to them the argument that the women they are discussing lived at the temporal edges of patriarchy--either at the current devolution of it that has been progressing over the last two hundred years or during the centuries of patriarchy's inception and codification in ancient Greece--I can make no argument that Rachel Speght lived during a unique era in patriarchal culture. For though patriarchy's reception as a monological ideology has waxed and waned throughout the centuries, the early modern period saw neither its birth nor its death. Yet within patriarchy itself is the basis of its own deconstruction: through subversive appropriations of the tenets and texts that justify misogyny many writers could, and did, generate not only feminisms, but clear moments of cultural transcendence. Such writers, from Christine de Pizan to Mary Wollstonecraft, wrote not only critiques of the ontological assumptions of patriarchy, they transcended those assumptions by affirming their own feminisms within and despite that patriarchy. My discussion of Rachel Speght's own transcendence of the patriarchal discourses that sought to both define her identity and determine the limits of her rhetorical situation will outline, all too briefly, both Speght's own attempts at transcending patriarchy and the pattern of such

transcendences attempted by many late medieval and early modern "proto-feminists."

Yet modern academic discourse, and simple good manners, must temporarily sidetrack my paper, for in all honesty I suspect many of you have not even heard of Rachel Speght, and I also suspect that some few of you may not have ready in your memories the particular forms that patriarchy took in early modern England; so I will here digress. Not yet twenty years old when she wrote her first pamphlet, Speght was a minister's daughter trained in English and at least some Latin. Five years after writing the pamphlet which I will discuss, *A Mousell for Melastomus* (1617), she composed a religious allegory in verse, *Morality's Memorandum* (1621), in response to her mother's death. Speght married late in the summer of 1621 to William Procter and stopped writing (Shepherd 58). In *A Mousell for Melastomus,* Speght attempts to enact the ethos of a good woman while she deconstructs the patriarchal definition of women. Her project is not unusual. During the pamphlet wars of the 1610's and 20's, the popular literature heatedly debated gender roles, cross-dressing, and women's essential nature. The debates in the pamphlets played out on London's streets, with women wearing spurs, daggers, and short hair. After the ascension of James the First to the throne, many of the courtiers' costumes became quite frilly, disrupting gender decorum further. Speght's pamphlet predates much of the most disruptive of the trans-gender behavior, yet it humbly engages the ontological issues evoked in the debate.

Despite our modern debate over this period's name--as early modern or as

Renaissance--women's ontological status as justified by this culture's patriarchy is not equivalent with our own problems with misogyny and its constructions of women's identities. Women's ontological status, as derived from orthodox, Renaissance Protestantism and as expressed in Speght's pamphlet and elsewhere, delineated the behaviors considered ethical for women. Women's status as essentially inferior was assumed to be *natural* to her, and to all creatures of her sex, in her deliberation as well as in all of her being. This culture derived their belief in women's natural inferiority from Aristotle and assumed that woman's natural character shaped the decorum of her social behaviors and delineated a separate ethics for her actions:

> A man would be thought a coward if he had no more courage than a courageous woman, and a woman would be thought loquacious if she imposed no more restraint on her conversation that the good man; and indeed their part in the management of the household is different, for the duty of the one is to acquire, and of the other to preserve. (Aristotle *Politics* 3.4; 1277b1, p. 2027 qtd. in Jordan 32)

Early modern beliefs about gender decorum defined women's primary tropes and relegated women's work to the preservation of men's acquisitions. The beliefs undergirding this gender decorum shaped the laws under which women lived (Jordan 65, 66-67), the conduct books women read (Bornstein x-xi, for instance), and an audience's assumptions about women speakers.

Constrained by the norms of acceptable feminine behavior, women were

> specifically discouraged from tapping into the newly popular channel of print; to do so threatened the cornerstone of their moral and social well-being.... An outpouring of published injunctions sought to ... by privatiz[e] women, directing them to remain safely enclosed within the home rather than engag[ing] in the circulation of social signs or events. (Wall 279-280)

By being privatized, women were, of course, constrained and silenced. Moreover, the ethics of their speech and behavior, and their resulting ethoi, were directly tied to their ontological status--a change in either an individual woman's behavior or women's overall ontological status would change the other for a woman. So a woman was expected both to actually fashion herself as some version of the "good woman type" and to consistently and continuously *seem* to be "good" as well:

> A woman would not get far in the marriage market if she was *said to be* a witch or a whore. Notice that it is the woman who is spoken about; she herself was not meant to be a speaker. The woman who did speak out, who cursed or yelled or argued with men, was said to be a scold or a shrew and regarded as little better than a whore. (Shepherd 11-12)

Women were written upon by the oral text of the community's gossip about them. Not surprisingly, the contemporary marriage manuals "monitor[ed] women's speech indoors and out, on the assumption that natural female garrulity must be carefully controlled in the interests of the domestic unit" (Jones 59).

Despite the culture of oppression and privatization, divine law technically depicted women as men's spiritual equals from the first, or priestly, creation story:

"God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Genesis I.27). Because both women and men were created in God's image, both were seen as having intelligence by the grace of God (MacLean 20), and Renaissance commentators typically read this verse as presenting men's and women's souls as spiritually equivalent (Jordan 64). Sometimes women, deriving their argument and ethoi from this passage, defined themselves as spiritually equal to men, and could, therefore, debate men about religion (Jordan 134), an opening that Speght uses to justify her writing. Nevertheless, this spiritual and intellectual equivalence did not construct women as socially or politically equal, for the Jahwist creation story justifies women's oppression:

> Because woman was initially made from the side of man to be his *helper*, and afterward, in her postlapsarian state, ordered to be his *subject*, she was doubly under-privileged. The manner of her creation revealed her ontological inferiority, her punishment after the loss of paradise her *political* subordination in historical time. (Jordan 22)

Unlike her doctrinal status, much of women's legal status was derived from this second creation story and this orthodox reading of it. These legal and theological definitions of women delineated the political and cultural identities women were expected to enact:

> In theological discourse, ... women, ... are both strictly subordinated and potentially dangerous....By theology ... and by law as well, women are defined and contained through their place in the marriage paradigm--as maidens,

> wives, or widows. These roles are in turn defined by the mode of sexuality appropriate to them: virginity for maidens, marital chastity for wives, and abstinence for widows...: women's economic, legal, and cultural status in relation to men, rest[ed] on male constructions of women's sexuality and sexual roles. The reiterated admonitions in the prescriptive literature [is] that women should be chaste, modest, silent and obedient. (Neely 214)

Theologically and legally, the identity that "good" women may construct for themselves is the same identity of all "good" women, which makes individual women into idealized "Woman" and removes from actual women any semblance of identity or self-definition, including an individuated ethos.

Despite such constraints, as Anne Rosalind Jones argues in *The Currency of Eros* concerning Renaissance women poets, an early modern woman's signature represents her asserting "her own claim to fame rather than her subservience to masculine ideals or to divine inspiration" (28). Such a woman writer, like Speght, fails to be properly "obedient" to the orthodox, masculine ideals: she fails "by speaking rather than listening," by working "in a public literary world" instead of "in a private household," and especially by using "argument and eloquence for her own ends" to "enter... into public discourse" (Jones 30). A woman's signature represents her rejection of the ethics of womanly speaking as derived from the orthodox definition of women.

Within these constraints, Rachel Speght's voice subversively constructs her identity as a good, yet individuated, woman. Her obedience in her ethos resulted, in

part, from her use of her sources: Much of Speght's work relies on Biblical material, Saint's lives, and Christian doctrine for evidence. She seems to be the good minister's good daughter, which justifies her more radical critiques of gender decorum and the current ontology of women's nature. Her rhetoric repeatedly affirms Protestant doctrine and then appropriates it to delineate a more enabling ontological status for women, including herself. Speght argues repeatedly for a redefinition of women's essential nature by shifting the Bible's negative, essentializing statements about the nature of women to situated statements about women and men in historical time. For instance, Speght rereads St. Paul's injunction against sexual intercourse by arguing that Paul was speaking only to the Corinthians (Speght 67-68). She then uses other Biblical evidence to argue that sexual intercourse is not essentially evil, asserting that the injunction was only temporary (Speght 68).

Protestant orthodoxy constrained her argument, yet within this rhetorical context were topoi that Speght appropriated to deconstruct the misogyny in orthodox belief and to construct an early modern feminist reading of orthodox Protestantism and of women's ethoi. In the first section of her pamphlet, which is an explicit defense of women, she considers four arguments: Eve's, and hence all women's, culpability for causing the Fall; Adam's culpability for the fall; Paul's injunction against sexual intercourse; and Solomon's compliant that he could find not one good woman among a thousand (Speght 65-66). Speght repeats the events of the Creation-fall story, but removes the "damaging significances" from those events

(Lewalski 166). For instance, Speght accepts the notion that Satan tempted Eve instead of Adam because she was the "weaker vessel" (Speght 66). But Speght empties the image of a weak vessel of its misogyny by comparing that vessel to "a crystal glass [which] sooner receives a crack than a strong stone pot" (Speght 66). Women's weakness is accepted, but shifted into a sign of her greater purity and refinement. More importantly, she shifts the significance of the punishments Adam and Eve receive for their transgression, arguing that the more damning punishment is given to the man because he was the greater transgressor and more responsible for the fall (Speght 66-67). Her argument moves the definition of women's virtue from service of men--from worshiping God in man--to virtue in herself, and it moves her spirituality from a mediated one through men to a direct relationship between herself and her God as she uses her voice, tongue, hands, and feet in God's service (Speght 69). Out of her argument Speght justifies her own ethos, for she delineates the "excellences" of women while she enacts the ethical behavior, including speech, which derives from those virtues.

Speght's ethos is bipartite, for she speaks as both a learned "proto-feminist," and as a demure, virginal, and fundamentally obedient young woman. Yet, because women's best rhetorical ornament was defined as their silence, Speght's very act of writing suggests that she failed to accurately assess her rhetorical situation. When an early modern woman published her work, she was often seen as "symbolically violat[ing] feminine modesty by exposing private thoughts to the world" (Goreau 15), which constructed her speech as unethically violating sexual taboos. Usually such

women writers were perceived as either a "virile woman" or a "shrew," depending primarily on whether the woman's critic was being generous. This ethical judgment of women writers' speech is noted by Grafton and Jardine in their study of the Nogarola sisters:

> 'Virile' argumentative ability and 'Amazon-like' independence from men may make nice points in arguing for the appropriateness of female humanistic education. But they can all too readily be seen in a 'real-life' context as a socially indecorous absence of modesty and due deference, if not as a real social threat--the proverbial husband-beating shrew.
>
> (Grafton and Jardine 39)

The "shrew" and the "virile woman," though they connote distinct female types, actually delineate the same masculine behaviors in a woman: the "masculine" and immodest skills of public speaking and logical reasoning. Speght's carefully structured text appropriates the masculinity of rationality, even as her writing refutes the gender role of modesty that silenced women. Such a "virile woman," ethos had the potential to problematize the Renaissance bifurcation of gender roles. When living women excelled in "rationality, courage, and physical strength" (Jordan 137), they troubled masculinity by disassociating gender roles from biological sex. So of all the stereotypes of women, the "virile woman's" speech was ideologically constructed as potentially reasonable, as potentially ethical, and so potentially persuasive.

Speght's bipartite ethoi attempt to synthesize the stereotypes of the virile

and the orthodox woman within her implied author's identity, implicitly appropriating the justification of women's spiritual equivalence with men from the priestly creation story to support her position. Speght presents herself as a good, virile woman while she enacts an ethos that simultaneously affirms and reshapes Protestant beliefs:

> [She]...offer[s] an especially effective rejoinder to [misogyny] in the rhetorical category of ethical proof: the creation of a suitable persona. She presents herself as the living refutation of [men's] charges against women: religious, learned, eminently rational, engagingly modest, unassuming, justifiably angry yet defending wronged women and their Creator. (Lewalski 162)

Certainly her ethoi enact her refutation of early modern misogyny, yet it also shifts as her argument shifts, moving away from the demure and towards an assured, yet orthodox, voice. Speght's ethoi become a vehicle for more than expressing her implied author's character, for through her ethoi as both "good" and "virile" she simultaneously affirms and appropriates the cultural context of that voice, a cultural context that shapes the pamphlet's rhetorical situation. Her ethoi, and the subversions of her culture in her argument, play with the signifiers that would mark her voice within the constraints of gender decorum, and that play frees her to transcend her rhetorical situation, to speak as a woman while she problematizes the cultural constructions of the role.

Yet even as I affirm Speght's achievement, I am constrained, as an honest student of history, to tell the rest of this tale. For all my argument which affirms

Speght's feminism, I must explain that her attempt failed: there is strong evidence that she was derided by her male readers and denigrated by sophisticated female readers. Yet from her attempt to transcend this rhetorical situation, a time in which misogyny and patriarchy was waxing, we can learn much about how feminism can function outside of modern and post-modern expectations and about how the character of the speaker, her culture, and her words can merge to create an empowered, individuated ethos.

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Signature: Dr. D. A. Combs

Printed Name/Position/Title: Dr. Debra Combs

Organization/Address:
English Dept.
Rhetoric Program
SMU
Dallas, Texas 75275

Telephone: (214) 373-7157 (Home)

FAX:

E-Mail Address: dcombs@post.smu.edu

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