

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN and GENDER in SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

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Women wrote poems in Shakespeare's England, including sonnets (you can see one by Mary Wroth [here](#)), elegies ([here](#) is a wonderful one by Hester Pulter), and defenses and celebrations of women. (You can read one by Katherine Philips [here](#)). While Shakespearean actors were all boys or men, women were nonetheless [involved in the theater in many ways](#). They also wrote plays, participated in court masques (elaborate entertainments featuring music and dance), were [great readers and patrons of writers](#), put on [household entertainments](#), and [performed](#) publicly in a range of venues from inns to the street.

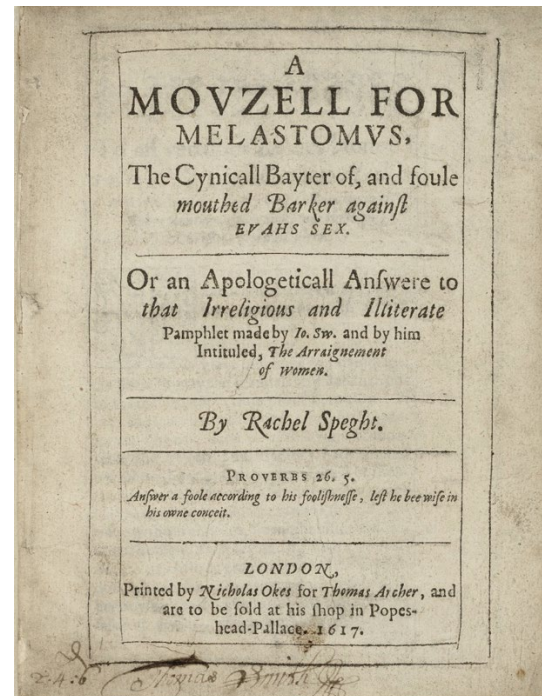
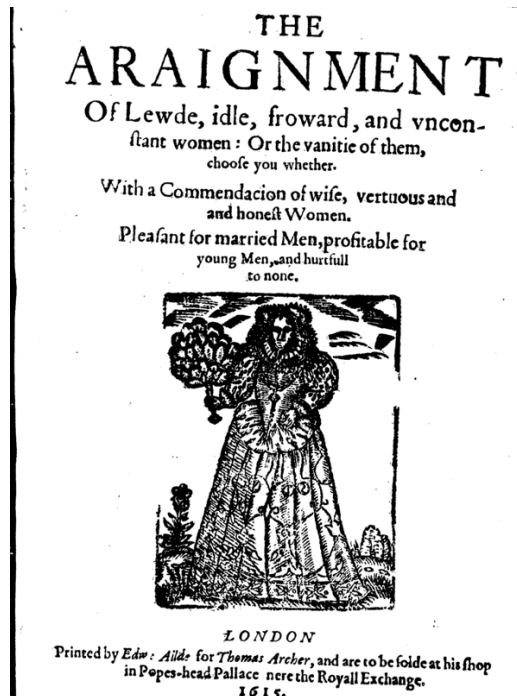
QUERELLE DES FEMMES

The *querelle des femmes*, or debate on women, in which writers attacked and/or defended women (often in the same venue!) was a popular form of entertainment from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance. See for example the following entry Anne Southwell (1574–1636) included in the commonplace book she kept in the 1620s. (Many early modern readers kept commonplace books in which they recorded favorite poems and quotations, often organizing them under headings, like “Love” or “War” that made them easy to retrieve for later use in writing or argument).

All married men desire to have good wives:
But few give good example, by their lives
They are our head they would have us their heels.
This makes the good wife kick the good man reles [ankles].
When god brought Eve to Adam for a bride
The text says she was ta'en from out mans side
A symbol of that side, whose sacred blood
Flowed for his spouse, the Churches saving good.
This is a misterie, perhaps too deep
For blockish Adam that was fallen asleep.



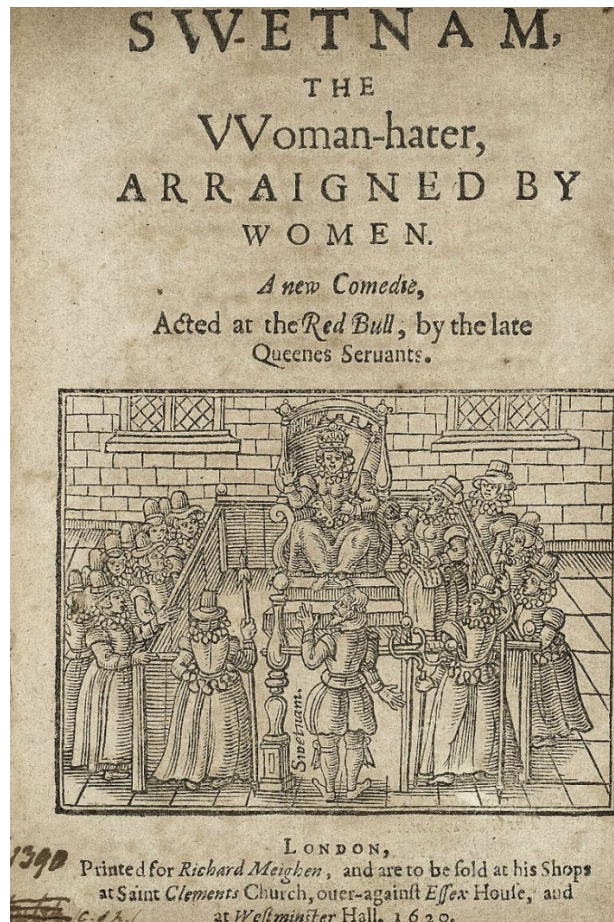
In response to a misogynist pamphlet entitled *The Arraignement of Women* (1615), Rachel Speght, a clergyman's daughter and poet, wrote *A Mouzell for Melastomus, the cynicall bayter of, and foule mouthed barker against Evahs sex* (1617). The pamphlet endeavors to “muzzle” or silence the “black mouthed” misogynist, Joseph Swetnam, who wrote *The Arraignement*.



Authors in the *querelle* endeavored to show their creativity with the conventions of the debate, as Speght does in her revisioning of Genesis 2.7, 21-26 which recounts, in opposition to Genesis 1.26-27 (“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them”), the creation of woman from man’s side:

“[The] matter whereof woman was made, was of a refined mould, if I may so speake: 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 soule: yet was shee not produced from Adams foote, to be his too low inferiour; nor from his head to be his superiour, but from his side, neare his heart, to be his equall; that where he is Lord, she may be Lady: and therefore saith God concerning man and woman iointly, Let them rule [Genesis 1. 26] [...] By which words, he makes their authority equall.”

The debate later became the subject of a play. What do you notice about the amazing woodcut on its title page?



The following two woodcuts from pamphlets in the *querelle* – the first from the earliest days of the printing press in England, and printed by the marvelously-named Wynkyn de Worde – give some sense of the participation the debate invited from its readers.

In Guillaume Alexis's *He [sic] begynneth an interlocucion, with an argument, betwyxt man and woman & whiche of them could prove to be most excelle[n]t* (1468?), the man seems to be speaking with authority to the woman – note his raised finger! What, though, might she be saying to him in response? (*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines an “interlocucion” (“interlocution”) – from the Latin *inter* (between) *loqui* (to speak) – as “the action (on the part of two or more persons) of talking or replying to each other”).



A woodcut in *Here begynneth a merry ieste of a shrewde and curste wyfe, lapped in morrelles skin, for her good behauyour* (1580), a pamphlet recounting a popular story of a man punishing his “shrewish” wife by wrapping her in the hide of a dead horse, has empty cartouches (speech bubbles) for both the man and the woman. Don’t they seem to invite you to fill them in? What else does the image seem to be telling us as readers/viewers?



DOMESTIC CONDUCT and MARITAL ADVICE

Books about how to behave yourself as part of a household and a marriage were enormously popular in Shakespeare's England, but they were not, as we might expect, wholly concerned with the subordination or obedience of women. Compare, for example, the following quotations from some of the most popular conduct books from the period. What do we learn from William Gouge's preface in particular?

William Perkins, *Christian Economy: or, A Short Survey of the Right Manner of Erecting and Ordering a Family According the Scriptures* (1609): "The husband is he which hath authority over the wife; hereupon in Scripture he is called the guide of her youth, and they twain being but one flesh, he is also the head over his wife [...] The duties of the wife are principally two. The first is to submit herself to her husband and to acknowledge and reverence him as her head in all things. [The second is obedience]."

William Whately, *A bride-bush, or, A wedding sermon compendiously describing the duties of marriage persons: by performing whereof, marriage shall be to them a great helpe, which now finde it a little hell* (1617): "[H]ee rules in a right manner, when in ruling, he rules himself by three principall vertues [...The third] is Justice, the soule of government, the true temperature of authority, without which it rots and putrifieth, and degenerated into the most fulsome and stinking carrion of tyranny. [...Let the wife] be made equall partner of that which her husband hath [and the question of obedience] *will not bee so much questioned, as the measure: Not whether shee must obey, but how farre.*"

William Gouge, *Of Domestical Duties* (1622; 1634): "I remember when these *Domestical duties* were first uttered out of the pulpit, much exception was taken against the application of a wife's subjection to the restraining her from disposing the common goods of the family without, or against, her husband's consent [...] Other exceptions were made against some other particular duties of wives [...] This just apology I have been forced to make, that I might not ever be judged (as some have censured me) an hater of women. Now, that in all those places where a wife's yoke may seem most to pinch, I might give some ease, I have to every head of a wives' duties made a reference, in the margin over against it, to the duties of husbands answerable thereunto, and noted the reference with his mark *, that it might be more readily turned unto.

