RACHEL SPEGHT

In *A Dream*, Rachel Speght (ca. 1597–16??) employs the device of the dream vision to represent, in allegory, the obstacles she encountered and the rapturous delight she experienced in her pursuit of learning. She describes her three-hundred-line poem as substantially autobiographical, “imaginary in manner, real in matter,” but she gives her own story a general application by putting into the mouth of Truth a strong defense of women’s education. The allegory plays off the medieval dream vision, the *Romance of the Rose*, whose lover-hero is variously hindered or helped by personifications of psychological faculties and forces, in his attempts to enter the Garden of Love. In *A Dream*, Rachel meets personifications of psychological and societal forces who either hinder or help her to enter the Garden of Erudition. The poem concludes with a reprise of the controversy Speght engaged in four years earlier and with a reference to her mother’s death, the occasion for the longer meditative poem, *Mortality’s Memorandum*, to which *A Dream* stands as preface.

Speght was a tolerably well-educated young woman of the London middle class; her father, who was a Calvinist clergyman and an author, provided her with some classical education—very rare for seventeenth-century women of any class. In her writings she both claims and displays a knowledge of Latin, a degree of training in logic and rhetoric, and familiarity with a wide range of learned authorities—a foundation that was probably derived from the popular handbooks, anthologies, or commonplace books widely used by writers of the era. Her tract defending women, *A Muzzle for Melastomus* [black mouth] (1617), is a response to the rambling, boistrous, tonally confused, but lively attack on women by Joseph Swetnam, *Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615). Speght’s work may be the only contribution by a woman to the vigorous Jacobean pamphlet war touched off by Swetnam over woman’s place and role; there were at least eight texts, including two satires on cross-dressing. Of these pamphlets’ authors, only Speght published under her own name and insisted on her authorial identity, thus becoming the first Englishwoman to claim the role of polemicist and critic of contemporary gender ideology. While she engages effectively in the railing attacks and witty repostes expected in such controversy, most of her treatise consists of serious argument, in which Speght reinterprets often-discussed biblical texts (especially Genesis 1–3) and presses them to yield a more expansive and equitable concept of gender.

*From A Dream*¹

[Rachel, asleep, has a dream which causes her to gaze upon the world and recognize with grief that she understands nothing of it. *Thought* asks why she is distressed.]

My grief, quoth I, is called *Ignorance*,
Which makes me differ little from a brute,
For animals are led by nature’s lore,

¹. The eight stanzas preceding this extract describe the circumstances of Rachel’s dream vision.
Their seeming science is but custom’s fruit;
When they are hurt they have a sense of pain,
But want the sense to cure themselves again.

And ever since this grief did me oppress,
Instinct of nature is my chiefeast guide.
I feel disease, yet know not what I ail,
I find a sore, but can no salve provide;
I hungry am, yet cannot seek for food,
Because I know not what is bad or good.

And sometimes when I seek the golden mean,
My weakness makes me fail of mine intent,
That suddenly I fall into extremes,
Nor can I see a mischief to prevent,
But see the pain when I the peril find,
Because my malady doth make me blind.

What is without the compass of my braine,
My sickness makes me say it cannot be;
What I conceive not, cannot come to pass,
Because for it I can no reason see.
I measure all men’s feet by mine own shoe,
And count all well, which I appoint or do.

The pestilent effects of my disease
Exceed report, their number is so great;
The evils, which through it I do incur,
Are more than I am able to repeat.
Wherefore, good Thought I sue to thee again,
To tell me how my cure I may obtain.

[Thought sends her to Age, to get help from Experience. Age says the remedy for her disease is Knowledge, found in Erudition’s Garden, and sends Industry to lead her there.]

Dissuasion hearing her assign my help,
(And seeing that consent I did detect)
Did many remoras° to me propose,
As dulness, and my memory’s defect,
The difficulty of attaining lore,°
My time, and sex, with many others more.

Which when I heard, my mind was much perplexed,
And as a horse new come into the field,
Who with a Harquebus² at first doth start,
So did this shot make me recoil and yield.
But of my fear when some did notice take,
In my behalf they this reply did make.

2. An early type of portable gun, mounted on a tripod or carriage in the field.
First quoth Desire, Dissuasion, hold thy peace,
These oppositions come not from above:
Quoth Truth, they cannot spring from reason's root,
And therefore now thou shalt no victor prove,
No, quoth Industry, be assured this,
Her friends shall make thee of thy purpose miss.

For with my sickle I will cut away
All obstacles, that in her way can grow;
And by the issue of her own attempt,
I'll make thee labor omnia vincit know.
Quoth Truth, and since her sex thou do'st object,
Thy folly I by reason will detect.

Both man and woman of three parts consist,
Which Paul doth body, soul, and spirit call:
And from the soul three faculties arise,
The mind, the will, the power; then wherefore shall
A woman have her intellect in vain,
Or not endeavor Knowledge to attain?

The talent God doth give, must be employed,
His own with vantage he must have again:
All parts and faculties were made for use;
The God of Knowledge nothing gave in vain.
'Twas Mary's choice our Savior did approve,
Because that she the better part did love.

Cleobulina and Demophila,
With Telesilla, as historians tell,
(Whose fame doth live, though they have long been dead)
Did all of them in Poetry excell.
A Roman matron that Cornelia hight, was named
An eloquent and learned style did write.

Hypatia in Astronomy had skill,
Aspatia was in Rhetoric so expert,

4. The bracketed biblical references in the margins are Speght's.
5. Speght refers to learned women from classical times often cited in defenses of women. Cleobulina or Eumerus (fl. 6th century B.C.E.), named for her father, Cleobulus of Rhodes, one of the seven sages, was celebrated for composing riddles in hexameter verse and for learning medical arts. Demophyle (ca. 600 B.C.E.), pupil and companion of Sappho, wrote erotic poems and hymns to Artemis. Telesilla (fl. ca. 510 B.C.E.), one of the so-called nine lyric muses, wrote odes, hymns, and battle songs and reportedly led a band of Athenian women to fight against Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. The “historians” are Plutarch and Philostratus.
6. Daughter of P. Scipio Africanus and mother of the two Gracchi tribunes, she was often identified as the source of their virtue and oratory.
7. Hypatia (ca. c.e. 370), instructed by her father Theon in philosophy and mathematics, presided over the Neoplatonic school of Plotinus in Alexandria and wrote on astronomy, algebra, conic sections, and other topics. Aspasia (470–410 B.C.E.), Pericles’ mistress, was described by Socrates in Plato’s Menexenus (probably ironically) as his own teacher, as teacher of rhetoric to Pericles, and as the composer of his famous funeral oration honoring the fallen in the Peloponnesian War. Speght’s honorific, “Duke,” plays on the Latin dux, leader, commander.
As that Duke Pericles of her did learn;
Arete\(^8\) did devote herself to art,
And by consent (which shows she was no foole)
She did succeed her father in his school.

\[\text{\ldots\ldots\ldots}\]

When Truth had ended what she meant to say,\(^9\)
Desire did move me to obey her will,
Whereunto consenting I did soon proceed,
Her counsel and my purpose to fulfill;
And by the help of Industry my friend,
I quickly did attain my journey’s end.

Where being come, Instruction’s pleasant air
Refreshed my senses which were almost dead,
And fragrant flowers of sage and fruitful plants
Did send sweet savors up into my head.
And taste of science appetite did move,
To augment Theory of things above.\(^1\)

There did the harmony of those sweet birds\(^2\)
(Which higher soar with Contemplation’s wings,)
Then barely with a superficial view,
Denote the value of created things
Yield such delight as made me to implore
That I might reap this pleasure more and more.

And as I walked wand’ring with Desire,
To gather that, for which I thither came,
(Which by the help of Industry I found)
I met my old acquaintance, Truth by name;
Whom I requested briefly to declare,
The virtue of that plant I found so rare.

Quoth she, by it God’s image man doth bear,
Without it he is but a human shape
Worse than the Devil, for he knoweth much:
Without it who can any ill escape?
By virtue of it evils are withstood;
The mind without it is not counted good.\(^3\)

Who wanteth Knowledge is a Scripture fool,
Against the Ignorant the Prophets pray;
And Hosea\(^4\) threatens judgment unto those
Whom want of Knowledge made to run astray.

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8. Arete (fl. 370–340 B.C.E.) succeeded her father Aristippus, founder of the Cyrenian school of philosophy, where she reportedly taught natural science, moral philosophy, and ethics for thirty-five years and wrote more than forty books.

9. In the five omitted stanzas, Truth refers in general terms to other learned women and urges Rachel to stand firm against Dissuasion.

1. I.e., the taste of learning whetted my longing ("appetite") to increase my conception ("theory") of higher things.

2. I.e., the song of birds (which through contemplation I am led to value more highly than a superficial view would provide, as evidence of the value of the creation) "yields such delight . . ."

3. Hosea 4.1–6.
215 Without it thou no practique good canst show,  
More than by hap,° as blind men hit a crow.

True Knowledge is the window of the soul,  
Through which her objects she doth speculate;°
It is the mother of faith, hope, and love,  
Without it who can virtue estimate?

By it, in grace thou shalt desire to grow;  
'Tis life eternal God and Christ to Know.  
[John 17.3]

Great Alexander⁴ made so great account,  
Of Knowledge, that he oftentimes would say,

That he to Aristotle was more bound  
For Knowledge, upon which Death could not prey,
Than to his father Phillip for his life,  
Which was uncertain, irksome, full of strife.

This true report put edge unto Desire,  
Which did incite me to increse my store,  
And told me 'twas a lawful avarice  
To covet Knowledge daily more and more.

This counsel I did willingly obey,  
Till some occurrence⁵ called me away,

And made me rest content with that I had,  
Which was but little, as effect doth show,  
And quenched hope for gaining any more,  
For I my time must other-ways bestow.

I therefore to that place returned again  
From whence I came, and where I must remain.

But by the way I saw a full fed Beast,⁶  
Which roared like some monster, or a Devil,  
And on Eve's sex he foamed filthy froth,  
As if that he had had the falling evil;°

To whom I went to free them from mishaps,  
And with a Muzzle sought to bind his chaps.

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4. Aristotle directed the education of Alexander the Great, son of Philip of Macedon.
5. The specific occasion is not clear but the following stanzas date it just before Speght's answer to Swetnam, i.e., about 1616, when Speght was eighteen or nineteen. At this point her formal education ended and she was recalled to domestic duties, though she was not married until four years later.
6. Swetnam, whose treatise attacking women she answered with her tract, A Muzzle for Melastomus. The remaining portion of the poem comments on that controversy, other answers to Swetnam, and the death of Speght's mother, which occasioned this volume.