Arline Votruba

Professor Joyce

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Misogyny Mistake: Women Ignite Ignorance

For all of time the question of what a woman’s role should consist of has been pondered and approached from a multitude of perspectives. Although women are generally deemed as having merits such as purity, charitableness, and modesty, there are a variety of interpretations of what a woman’s role requires. While some cultures value women, giving them the majority of societal power like in Native American cultures, it is found more commonly that societies view women as the less powerful of the genders. During the 1600’s, early tracts on women and gender were published in an attempt to address the question of who women were and what their purpose was (Damrosch). The multitude of attempts to determine what a woman’s role requires created a literary conversation between those authors who wrote and those who responded to the original writings in a sort of literary discussion.

These authors attempted to solve the many gender-related mysteries that remain today, over 400 years later. Misogynistic men like Joseph Swetnam published writings drawing on the many negative stereotypes of women present within society at the time of publication. Included in his many accusations was the idea that women are sprung from the devil himself. Many authors such as Rachel Speght and Ester Sowernam were compelled to respond to such negative writings, triggered by the lack of logical support for the multiple harsh accusations made by these ignorant misogynists. Although no definitive conclusion has been, nor may ever be reached as to what a woman’s role within society consists of, these early 17th century writings and responses demonstrate the way in which literature allows for thinkers to have a progressive medium where what once was stated as fact can be challenged and disproved through more focused and clear elaboration. Referring to writings on the topic of gender differences such as *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* by Joseph Swetnam, A *Muzzle for Melastomus* by Rachel Speght, and *Ester Hath Hanged Haman* from Chapter 7 entitled *The answer to all objections which are material made against women*, can benefit us with a distinguished understanding of how sex and gender were represented during the period. When reading these pieces, it is important to understand the difference between what sex and gender mean. While sex can be defined as representing the biological difference of men and women, gender refers to the representation of sex difference as it is constructed within a society. This indicates that when speaking of gender, it is implied that the place of women within society is determined by the surrounding culture as opposed to nature (Damrosch). The culture during the early 1600’s was very religious and it is clear that biblical references helped shape the arguments of what women’s roles were.

During the early 1600’s, Joseph Swetnam published *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women* without restraint. His extremely cynical view of women drew on most of the negative stereotypes that existed about women at the time. He begins Chapter 2 by referring to stories of the bible and attempting to gather his understanding of women through the many tales that he blindly twists and misinterprets from religious text. In his introduction he refers to Solomon commenting, “He also in many places of his book of Proverbs exclaims most bitterly against lewd women calling them all that naught is,” Swetnam takes small lines from biblical writings out of context in order to portray women as blasphemous creatures (Luckyj). In just the next paragraph Swetnam states that, “Men, I say, may live without women, but women cannot live without men,” demonstrating his utter ignorance by completely failing to account for how each man came to be alive. Clearly women and men must coexist and depend on one another for a variety of reasons, but most importantly this statement by Swetnam urges the reader to consider the necessity for mothers in order for humans to continue life. Swetnam declaring men are able to live without women exacerbates Swetnam’s ignorance. Swetnam’s arguments are unreliable and often hold an undertone of his own personal issues with women. For example, Swetnam declares:

Then who can but say that women are sprung from the devil, whose heads,

hands and hearts, minds and souls are evil, for women are called the hook of

all evil, because men are taken by them as a fish is taken in with the hook. (Swetnam)

A statement like this one shows his personal frustration with women, however it does not hold any genuine truth or scientific explanation. Swetnam continues to imply that his concept of women has been tainted by personal experience when he says, “They will play the horse-leech to suck away thy wealth, but in the winter of thy misery, she will fly away from thee.” There is no reasoning behind such an accusation besides a personal experience. Upon reading this line, it seems logical to infer that Swetnam has been in a relationship with a woman and she left during unpleasant times or that he has been witness to a similar scenario. To attribute one personal experience to an entire group of people, specifically an entire sex, is absurd and discredits Swetnam. His lack of dependability grows as he continues to make claims. Without contributing any scientific explanation Swetnam states, “…women causeth the fever and the gout,” a completely untrue statement. Swetnam’s lack of evidential support is enough to disprove his credibility, thus why women who read his laughable elaboration did not standby idly and simply accept it as true. Instead, writers such as Rachel Speght and Ester Sowernam wrote responses that directly commented on the faults of Swetnam’s accusations in order to be certain Swetnam’s writing would be discredited.

Rachel Speght felt it impossible to refrain from writing a rebuttal addressing the falseness of Swetnam’s elaboration. Only 19 years old when she published *A Muzzle for Melastomus*, Speght was infuriated at what she interpreted as a serious attack on women (Damnrosch). Speght initially addresses Swetnam’s inconceivable piece by strategically referencing Genesis 1.31, “The work of creation being finished, this approbation thereof was given by God himself, that ‘All was very good.’” This loaded quote from Genesis is enough to disprove most of the claims Swetnam concocted out of scraps of religious text. Speght does not let up with this as she continues on to elaborate on 4 major claims made by Swetnam and disproves them with specific quotations from the bible.

While Swetnam’s writing was often just accusation after accusation without any supportive evidence, Speght structured her argument to be unarguable. She specifically planned how she would go through and discredit the entirety of Swetnam’s claims one step at a time. She begins with her overarching statement that God himself said after creation that “All was very good,” and then Speght lists the 4 parts of Swetnam’s argument that she will disprove. Then she addresses each of the 4 parts with great vigor and uses quotes and evidence directly from the bible to be certain none of her claims are considered unaccountable. Speght proves her religious knowledge by pointing out that some of Swetnam’s biblical references are not truly supportive of his points. She disqualifies Swetnam’s use of religious texts by indicating that when one finds the lines Swetnam uses to support his accusations, the lines often mean not what Swetnam says they do (van Heertum). While disproving Swetnam, Speght addresses the fourth of her points by quoting a portion of the bible that Swetnam has quoted. She continues by saying, “For answer of which, if we look into the story of his life, we shall find therin a commentary upon his enigmatical sentence included,” indicating that Swetnam left out details when referencing the bible either to better support his argument or because he did not fully analyze the information he used within his writing for support. Speght boldly disproves Swetnam’s many unclear and misinformed claims against women in order to gain a sense of justice.

Ester Sowernam felt compelled to respond to both Swetnam and Speght’s writings. Firstly, Ester Sowernam’s response takes a stance because the pen name comes from the name Esther a heroine from the Old Testament who defended her people against Haman. The name Sowernam is the antitheses of Swetnam’s last name poking fun at him by showing the difference of “sweet” and “sour.” Sowernam takes a more psychological and social approach than moral and logical when attempting to criticize misogyny (Damrosch). After reading both Swetnam’s book and Speght’s response, Sowernam discussed them at a dinner party before deciding to write her own response. Sowernam delves into her response by questioning why it is that Swetnam makes a point that a woman gains her characteristics from a man, if then he says women are all evil. She catches him in his mess of unsupported accusations addressing the fact that Swetnam advises against marrying a widow but continuing that, “A widow is framed to the conditions of another man.” Sowernam is clever by beginning her response with catching a discrepancy in Swetnam’s writing, showing she has read, reread, and truly decoded the unsuccessful attempt by Swetnam to explain women’s roles in society. Sowernam mocks Swetnam questioning, “Is it not a wonder that your pamphlets are so disbursed? Are they not wise men to cast away time and money upon a book which cutteth their own throats?” Sowernam is direct in making Swetnam look foolish for unknowingly putting down men within his argument. Sowernam again blames men for the faults that Swetnam attributed to women when she questions, “How rare a thing is it for women to prostitute and offer themselves? How common a practice is it for men to seek and solicit women to lewdness?” Sowernam is comical in her mockery of Swetnam, being careful to support each of her accusations in order to validate her point. She is being bold yet truthful when asking Swetnam how frequently women actually prostitute and pointing out that prostitution would not exist if men were not searching for it and causing women to sin. She refrains from merely blaming Swetnam, establishing her ethos while bringing up the fact, “You challenge women for untamed and unbridled tongues; woman was never noted for so shameless, so brutish, so beastly a scold as you prove yourself in this base and odious pamphlet,” accusing Swetnam of an unbridled tongue simply for having written his elaboration on women (Luckyj). Sowernam sums up her rebuttal by directly stating Swetnam’s name, making it extremely apparent that this is an address directly to him. She clarifies one final distinction in the end, “The difference between a railing scold and an honest accuser is this, the first rageth upon passionate fury without bringing cause or proof, the other bringeth direct proof for what she allegeth.” Sowernam’s final words depict the main point of both her and Speght’s rebuttal against Swetnam, that you cannot just make claims without accurate support.

The literary conversation between Swetnam, Speght and Sowernam is an excellent example of the way authors interact with one another and how ideas can be compared, contrasted and challenged within a culture. It allows insight into multiple perspectives that reflect societal attitudes towards women in the early 1600’s. This depiction of authors writing to disprove other author’s work is significant in gaining an understanding that it is crucial to find multiple sources and perspectives on a subject before making conclusions. A passionate argument by an author like Swetnam, though may appear to be true due to his protuberant boldness, can be discredited with just a few paragraphs as we see in the lines written by Speght and Sowernam. The three pieces work together to create a sensible depiction of the mystery behind the remaining question of what a woman’s role truly means.

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