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“Yong, and the unworthiest of thousands”: Youth and Subjectivity in Shakespeare and Speght

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Article abstract

This article explores youthful subjectivity in both dramatic and non-dramatic verse, considering representations of female youth in Shakespeare’s late romance *Pericles* alongside the work of poet and polemicist Rachel Speght. The complex, unstable category of youth contributes both to Shakespeare’s rendering of his fourteen-year-old female character in his play and to Speght’s portrayal of herself in her poetry. Shakespeare’s Marina narrates her own tale and reconstitutes narratives spun about her, creating space for youthful self-fashioning. Nineteen-year-old Speght undertakes a similar project of self-making in her prose treatises and particularly in her two published poems, “A Dreame” and *Mortalities Memorandum*. This article compares self-fashioning in the work of a young female writer to the construction of the young female self by a contemporary male writer, suggesting that youthful subjectivity inheres for both girls in principles of authorship and narrative authority.



“Yong, and the unworthiest of thousands”: Youth and Subjectivity in Shakespeare and Speght

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This article explores youthful subjectivity in both dramatic and non-dramatic verse, considering representations of female youth in Shakespeare's late romance Pericles alongside the work of poet and polemicist Rachel Speght. The complex, unstable category of youth contributes both to Shakespeare's rendering of his fourteen-year-old female character in his play and to Speght's portrayal of herself in her poetry. Shakespeare's Marina narrates her own tale and reconstitutes narratives spun about her, creating space for youthful self-fashioning. Nineteen-year-old Speght undertakes a similar project of self-making in her prose treatises and particularly in her two published poems, "A Dreame" and Mortalities Memorandum. This article compares self-fashioning in the work of a young female writer to the construction of the young female self by a contemporary male writer, suggesting that youthful subjectivity inheres for both girls in principles of authorship and narrative authority.

Cet article explore la subjectivité juvénile dans les vers dramatiques et non-dramatiques, en prenant en compte les représentations de la jeunesse féminine dans la pièce tardive de Shakespeare Périclès et l'œuvre de la poète et polémiste Rachel Speght. La catégorie complexe et instable de la jeunesse contribue à la fois à la représentation du personnage féminin de quatorze ans chez Shakespeare et au portrait que Speght fait d'elle-même dans sa poésie. La Marina de Shakespeare narre sa propre histoire et reconstitue les récits racontés sur elle, créant un espace de façonnement de soi juvénile. La jeune Speght de dix-neuf ans entreprend un projet d'auto-engendrement similaire dans ses traités en prose et en particulier dans ses deux poèmes publiés, « A Dreame » et Mortalities Memorandum. Cet article compare le façonnement de soi dans l'œuvre d'une jeune femme écrivaine et la construction de soi d'une jeune femme par un écrivain masculin contemporain, suggérant que la subjectivité juvénile des deux jeunes filles est inhérente aux principes d'auctorialité et d'autorité narrative.

In her dedication to *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, nineteen-year-old Rachel Speght adopts a particular rhetorical posture when she claims to be “yong, and the unworthiest of thousands.”¹ Parenthetical and self-effacing, Speght's remark positions her to enter the ancient debate, often termed the *querelle des femmes*, over the nature of women. Speght's answer, one of several, to Joseph Swetnam's infamous misogynist tract is the only one to name its author: identifying herself, Speght then goes on to appropriate the conventions of

1. Speght, *Mouzell*, 3.

the formal controversy.² A young author and burgeoning poet, Speght insists on her role as a writer while interrogating versions of women created by the controversy generally and by Swetnam specifically. This essay focuses on her construction of a youthful subjectivity in her prose treatises and her two published poems, “A Dreame” and *Mortalities Memorandum*, comparing this construction to the similar rendering of a young female character by Speght’s contemporary: Marina of Shakespeare’s late romance *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*.

Drawing on and contributing to recent early modern and Shakespearean scholarship about girls and youth,³ I read both Speght and Marina not as women or children, but as teenaged girls. Speght’s emphasis on her own youth is foundational to her sense of herself as an author: she claims a specific identity as a young person in her dedications to both *Mouzell for Melastomus* and the appended tract “Certaine Quaeres to the Bayter of Women.” Shakespeare similarly emphasizes Marina’s age, specifying that she is fourteen. Critics tend to categorize Marina as either a child or a young woman, or to conflate these groups: Joseph Campana, for example, describes both Marina and *The Tempest’s* Miranda as “children,” while also noting they are “likely to be adolescents or young adults.”⁴ Deanne Williams dubs Marina an “articulate and self-possessed young woman”;⁵ to Stephen Orgel she is “one of the most forceful and independent women Shakespeare created.”⁶ Shakespeare, though, in specifying her age (as he does, too, for Miranda, Perdita, Juliet, and Anne Page of *The Merry Wives*) offers a character who is neither a child nor a woman;

2. Woodbridge, in *Women and the English Renaissance*, uses this term to denote the Jacobean phase of the *querelle des femmes* (13).

3. On “girls,” see Balizet, *Shakespeare and Girls’ Studies*; Higginbotham, *Girldhood*; and Williams, *Performance of Girldhood*. On “boys,” see Knowles, *Shakespeare’s Boys*. Early modern childhood is also a rich and growing field of research. Much of this interesting work attends to childhood as a concept rather than an age category and often conflates children, teens, and young adult characters. See Lamb, *Reading Children*; Chedgzoy, Greenhalgh, and Shaughnessy, *Shakespeare and Childhood*; Immel and Witmore, *Childhood and Children’s Books*; Witmore, *Pretty Creatures*; and Rutter, *Shakespeare and Child’s Play*. Contributors to Preiss and Williams’s recent edited volume, *Childhood, Education, and the Stage in Early Modern England*, examine the ways childhood “signifies beyond chronological age,” examining childhood’s “larger discursive formations” in such cultural representations as literature and drama (Williams, “Introduction,” 5, 3). See also Miller and Purkiss, *Literary Cultures*.

4. Campana, “Shakespeare’s Children,” 11.

5. Williams, “Papa Don’t Preach,” 597.

6. Orgel, introduction to *Pericles*, xlii.

represented initially as an infant, she next appears—and ends the play—as an adolescent, a teenaged girl in the throes of self-fashioning.⁷

For Shakespeare and Speght, the youthful self-fashioning of girls entails an intertextual reconstruction of old forms. The playwright, adapting folktales and romances, creates Marina, a reconstitution of a stock figure who tells her own story; the poet, adapting a conventional pamphlet debate, explores her own emergent subjectivity. The stock representation of women proffered by Swetnam and other writers of the controversy interestingly resembles the familiar figure of the teenaged folktale princess, transformed by Shakespeare into his character Marina. Shakespeare draws on elements of folktale, as well as on a number of romance narratives and analogues—the fifth-century Latin *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri* and its English retellings: Gower’s fourteenth-century *Confessio Amantis*, the medieval *Gesta Romanorum*, and Twine’s sixteenth-century *The Patterne of Painefull Adventures*—to shape his fourteen-year-old character into something surprisingly new.

Complexly rendered young characters appear frequently in Shakespeare’s work (Romeo, Juliet, Prince Hal, Marina, Perdita, Miranda, Bertram, Helena, and Anne Page, to name a few) and are suggestive of the playwright’s interest in adolescent subjectivity. *The Tempest*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *Pericles* evoke a particular interest in the self-fashioning of teenaged girls. All three romances adapt earlier tales and texts, situating teenaged girls within those stories. However, Shakespeare’s young characters fail to settle into customary roles for adolescent girls, instead using narrative to resist the imposition of such roles. I suggest that the complex and unstable category of youth contributes to the rendering of the young female subject for both Shakespeare and Speght. Comparing Shakespeare’s construction of Marina to Speght’s project of self-making illuminates the ways youthful subjectivity inheres for both writers in their principles of authorship and narrative authority. At the intersection of the texts’ many contrasts in form, context, and approach—dramatic and nondramatic poetry, male and female authorship, representations of character and of self—there exists a shared perception of female youth, with each author shedding light not only on the other’s construction of this figure, but also on our current understanding of the early modern teenaged girl.

7. On the self-fashioning of Shakespeare’s teens, see Prusko, “Youth and Privacy”; and Prusko, “‘Who hath got the right Anne?’”

“Thy speech hath altered it”: *Pericles’s* Marina

In its appropriation of folktale and romance, *Pericles* draws on familiar motifs: tales of the murderous stepmother and of the riddle to win the princess (or to fail and die) resonate in the play. Karen Bamford identifies *Cinderella* and *Peau D’Asne* as particular folktale analogues for *Pericles* and describes the play as a “traditional family romance” that works to fulfill patriarchal desires: the plot of family separation and eventual reunification serves the wishes of the father, while abandoning the daughter to marriage.⁸ Lorraine Helms, examining various contexts for the brothel scene in *Pericles*, discusses the Senecan figure of the Prostitute Priestess: kidnapped by pirates and held in a brothel, she saves herself from rape through her own eloquence; this motif appears in Lazarus Piot’s 1576 translation of Alexander Silvayn’s *The Orator*. Re-emerging later, the motif shifts, taking shape as the kidnapped princess in Greek romance and the virgin martyr in Christian hagiography. These later adaptations of Senecan rhetoric into narrative forms eliminate debate over the character’s status as a prostitute or a holy virgin, as they “[exert] narrative authority to close the case of the Prostitute Priestess” by leaving her to either marriage or martyrdom.⁹

Shakespeare, though, drawing on these analogues, reopens and transforms them into a character who participates in a tale told about herself. Marina rises to striking prominence late in *Pericles* when she uses her narrative skill to save her life, preserve her chastity, and tell her story. Like *The Winter’s Tale*, *Pericles* displays a strong metatheatrical awareness; as Kenneth Muir writes, “Shakespeare is aware that his story is too good to be true, but such fables are a criticism of life as it is.”¹⁰ Like Perdita, Marina is a princess lost and miraculously found, and her story bears strong affinities to Shakespeare’s source materials; however, *Pericles* moves beyond its sources in its specific use of Marina as a narrator, reimagining this young character. In Greek romance and Christian hagiography, argues Helms, eloquence and oratory save the virgin, who, like Marina, is held captive in a brothel. But *Pericles* “reanimates” this figure: Marina’s eloquence is sufficient to preserve her chastity, setting her apart from her more violent analogues.¹¹

8. Bamford, “Romance,” 143, 147.

9. Helms, “Saint in the Brothel,” 324, 319, 326.

10. Muir, *Shakespeare as Collaborator*, 95–96, qtd. in Ewbank, “My Name Is Marina,” 129.

11. Helms, “Saint in the Brothel,” 320, 329.

Marina's narrative powers are striking in a play marked by fragmentation, dislocation, and disunity. A work of split, contested authorship, requiring substantial reconstruction,¹² *Pericles* takes up corresponding thematic concerns: characters lack a sense of belonging, and their identity and whereabouts are frequently in question. Geographically, the play is expansive, and the plight of many characters is to wander, either homeless or lost. T. S. Eliot's poem "Marina," based on Shakespeare's character, takes as its epigraph a line from Seneca: "Quis hic locus, quai region, quaie mundi plaga?" (What place is this, what kingdom, what part of the world?).¹³ Marina is perhaps the most dislocated character in a play that offers no consistent, reliable, or believable space into which its audience can settle; the constantly shifting setting underlies the play's metatheatrical quality and assists Shakespeare's aim to destabilize his princess character. "A more blust'rous birth had never babe,"¹⁴ says Pericles of his daughter, and indeed travel, tempests, and homelessness have been hallmarks of her short life. But the fragmentation and dislocation of her life releases Marina from the hold of a prescribed identity, letting her take the lead in rebuilding the world of the play: to Marina falls the final reconstruction of the story. To borrow John D. Niles's term, oral narrative confers upon Marina a "world-making ability"¹⁵ as she pieces the tale together by reconstituting narrative disunities, fragmented selves, and lost characters.

The style of the play is inherently metatheatrical. Claire Preston notes that *Pericles* is characterized "by a great deal of telling, retelling, and reporting in the place of direct action."¹⁶ This diegetic method of presentation, Preston argues,

12. See Orgel, introduction to *Pericles*, xxxii–xxxvii. Orgel discusses the stylistic differences between the first two acts and the rest of the play, and the problems with introducing it into the canon, and notes that many of the play's passages are "muddled and incoherent"; nevertheless, he writes, "there is something in it we want to claim for Shakespeare, something our Shakespeare cannot do without" (xxxii).

13. Eliot, "Marina," line 1; my translation.

14. Shakespeare, *Pericles* 11.28. Hereafter cited as scene and line number in the text. Cohen's reconstructed text follows the Oxford edition in drawing on Shakespeare's co-author George Wilkins' prose version of the play, *The Painfull Adventures of Pericles Prince of Tyre* (1608), to emend difficulties in language and meter in Wilkins' section of the drama (scenes 1–9).

15. Niles, *Homo Narrans*, 3.

16. Preston, "Emblematic Structure," 21. Roebuck and Macguire also note that "in crises, characters' instincts or instructions are to narrate (Cleon gives accounts of famine, Diana instructs Pericles to tell his story at Ephesus, Marina tells her life story to Pericles)"; thus, the play "dramatizes the recuperative potential of storytelling" ("Language of National Origins," 30n34).

exists alongside a mimetic method, apparent, for example, in the dumbshows and the recognition scenes. Interestingly, both word pictures (diegesis) and stage pictures (mimesis) “are accompanied by corresponding interpretive glosses [...] *Pericles* is full of narration”;¹⁷ or, as Gower puts it, “What’s dumb in show, I’ll plain with speech” (*Per.* 10.14). Such strategies encourage the audience “to view events from a certain distance, to attend to the larger pattern that unfolds rather than becoming emotionally engaged.”¹⁸ Bringing to a close his long account of Pericles’s marriage and departure for Tyre, Gower instructs the audience, “In your imagination hold / This stage the ship, upon whose deck / The sea-tossed Pericles appears to speke” (10.58–60). *Pericles* insists on reminding its audience of its status as art, and Marina is heavily invested in this metatheatrical strategy.

Marina features prominently as narrator of her own tale, destabilizing tales told about herself with tales she herself tells. This tactic creates space for a process of youthful self-fashioning, a claim I make with the help of Niles’s contention in *Homo Narrans* that it is chiefly through oral narrative that people move beyond mere survival and learn to “create themselves as human beings.”¹⁹ This project of self-making is often apparent in Shakespeare’s girls and in his plays that lay claim to oral forms; a merging of the oral and the literate has implications for female teenaged characters. Diane Purkiss writes of the marginality of teenagers, especially teenaged girls, to their own culture—a disenfranchisement “far truer” in early modern times than it is now—but stresses that “they did have a culture, and its fugitive traces can be glimpsed in unlikely places; in folktales and in the literary texts that expropriate them.”²⁰ She stresses that “teenage girls in the early modern period did have a storyteller’s stake in the tale of the lost girl, because it was a story they told about themselves, a story that could be a tale of rebellion and subversion of all that being a teenage girl meant.”²¹

17. Preston, “Emblematic Structure,” 22–23.

18. Cohen, introduction to *Pericles*, 2724.

19. Niles, *Homo Narrans*, 3.

20. Purkiss, “Fractious,” 58. Purkiss also points out that to apply the word “teen” to the youth of this period “is not quite as anachronistic as it seems,” since the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the word’s first recorded use to 1673. “Adolescent” has medieval origins, with the first recorded use in 1482 (57); in 1621, Rachel Speght used the word “adolescence” in *Mortalities Memorandum*.

21. Purkiss, “Fractious,” 57.

A prominent narrator in the play, Marina undoes narrativized versions of herself. The roots of her character lie in earlier renderings of victimized virgins, figured as either a princess or a martyr, but Marina's status as narrator both focuses and unsettles that foundation. Left in the care of Dionyza and Cleon at Tarsus, Marina grows into a beautiful girl who "gets / All praises" (15.33–34), inciting the envy of her adoptive mother, whose own daughter pales in comparison; Dionyza, therefore, instructs Leonine to take the girl for a walk along the seashore and murder her. Marina begins as a stock character, and as Gower puts it, she is "absolute Marina": lovely to look at, chaste, gifted with needle, thread, and lute, ripe for marriage, and helpless. Her response to her would-be killer's threats, however, is startling. The girl answers Leonine's order that she say her prayers not with tearful pleas for her life, but with a string of questions: "What mean you?" (15.117), she inquires reasonably. "Why would you kill me?" (121); "Why would she have me killed?" (122); "How have I offended / Wherein my death might yield her any profit / Or my life imply her danger?" (129–31).

Having complicated the matter with her questions, Marina turns to narrative in a bid to save her life. First, she paints a picture of herself designed to engender Leonine's pity: "I never once killed a mouse nor hurt a fly. / I trod once on a worm against my will, / But I wept for it" (15.127–29). Next, she works to narrativize her assailant: "You have a gentle heart. I saw you lately / When you caught hurt in parting two that fought. / Good sooth, it showed well in you" (135–37). Travis Curtwright examines Marina's narrative speech in light of its evocation of ethos, suggesting that Shakespeare attributes her with both "self understanding and rhetorical purpose,"²² while Williams writes of Marina's "rhetorical powers."²³ The play's metatheatrical method echoes in Marina's voice; like Gower's, Marina's speech and stories shape and propel the action, but hers do more: they help her to self-fashion and to take control of her fate.

Kidnapped by pirates and sold to a brothel in Mytilene, Marina finds herself at the mercy of the Bawd, the Pander, and their servant Boulton, who plan to market their teenaged captive: "Boulton, take you the marks of her, the colour of her hair, complexion, height, her age, with warrant of her virginity, and cry 'He that will give most shall have her first'" (16.50–52). Boulton, having "drawn her picture with my voice" (83) calls her a "sign" (100): she is meant to inhabit

22. Curtwright, "Falseness," 103.

23. Williams, "Papa Don't Preach," 597.

the pictorial representation of herself that he has “cried through the market” (82). Bawd tries to subjugate Marina to this version of herself and to her will: “Come, you’re a young foolish sapling, and must be bowed as I would have you” (76–77). Marina resists the brothel owners by rejecting their representation of her: they would reduce her to a body and place her corporeality on display, but again she turns to narrative, and her speech supersedes her physical body. Preaching to brothel visitors rather than entertaining them, her words are so effective that Bawd complains, “she’s able to freeze the god Priapus and undo the whole of generation” (19.12–13).

Marina’s strategy, used first with Leonine, is to contrive alternate versions of both herself and her persecutors: in her lengthy speech to Lysimachus, Marina constructs a convincing representation of both herself (“My life is yet unspotted” [19.102]) and of him (“I hear say you’re of honourable blood, / And are the governor of this whole province” [76–77]). Deeply moved, Lysimachus responds, “I did not think / Thou couldst have spoke so well, ne’er dreamt thou couldst. / Though I brought hither a corrupted mind, / Thy speech hath altered it” (119–22). She uses the same tactic yet again to save herself from Boulton: reversing his earlier advertisement of her, Marina projects a vision of Boulton’s life, suggesting occupations for him, any of which would be preferable to his current employment: “Do anything but this thou dost. Empty / Old receptacles or common sew’rs of filth, / Serve by indenture to the public hangman— / Any of these are yet better than this” (188–91). Just as she does with Boulton, Marina imagines different possibilities for her own life. Compelled to enact certain roles—a helpless young girl, a victimized folktale princess, and a pitiful prostitute (“you must seem to do that fearfully which you commit willingly,” Bawd urges [16.102–3])—Marina instead recasts herself into different roles. Rather than earn money for the brothel with her body, for example, she reinvents herself as a teacher, and finds she can reduce learned men to silence with her wisdom: “Deep clerks she dumbs,” says Gower (20.5). Rather than being forced into silence, Marina instead silences others as she resists the subjectivities and false narratives imposed upon her.

Marina’s exchanges with Leonine, Boulton, Lysimachus, and especially with Pericles at the end of the play, are illustrative of adolescent self-fashioning. Jennifer Higginbotham’s interesting analysis of Marina suggests that, when Marina is born, Pericles humanizes his infant daughter by gendering her, naming her, acknowledging her need for food and protection, and imagining her life as

an adult woman.²⁴ The father’s “oral scripting” of his daughter’s life initiates her into girlhood while she is yet an infant.²⁵ However, Higginbotham also argues that Shakespeare does not dramatize the transitional period of girlhood, and indeed she suggests that Marina transforms suddenly into a mother figure to Pericles, telling her story only to “recall him to his senses.”²⁶ I think, rather, that the adolescent Marina takes over as the teller of her own story for reasons of her own. As Williams writes, “Unlike Antiochus’ quiet daughter, and unlike her counterparts in the sources of *Pericles*, Shakespeare’s Marina is neither defined nor dominated by her father.”²⁷

Marina’s capacity to define herself culminates in the recognition scene with her father at the end of the play. This key moment of youthful individuation inheres in oral narrative as Marina takes charge of her life story, rewriting the tale Pericles thought he knew. She manipulates the tale and its audience, narrating in fits and starts, withholding and delaying the communication of vital details: having briefly sketched her lineage, she says in an aside, “I will desist. / But there is something glows upon my cheek, / And whispers in mine ear ‘Stay till he speak’” (21.82–84). Pericles must wait some thirty lines more, and issue plea after plea—“Where do you live?” (101); “Prithee speak” (107); “Tell thy story” (122)—before his daughter will state, “My name, sir, is Marina” (130).

Slicing through false narrative and correcting Pericles’s version of events, Marina, argues Inga-Stina Ewbank, “[works] through words on people’s minds,”²⁸ for she is possessed of a “therapeutic literalness of speech.”²⁹ The dialogue of the recognition scene indeed “creates character [...] [I]t enables us to share in the interaction of two minds.”³⁰ Ewbank notes that the lengthy dialogue between father and daughter in Shakespeare’s play does not exist in either John Gower’s *Confessio Amatis* or Lawrence Twine’s *Patterne of Painefull Adventures*, and that Marina’s source character in these works is “defensive and pathetic.”³¹ The eloquence and wit of *Pericles*’s Marina seems to be Shakespeare’s own

24. Higginbotham, *Girlhood*, 114–15.

25. Higginbotham, *Girlhood*, 115.

26. Higginbotham, *Girlhood*, 116.

27. Williams, “Papa Don’t Preach,” 597.

28. Ewbank, “My Name Is Marina,” 117.

29. Ewbank, “My Name Is Marina,” 116.

30. Ewbank, “My Name Is Marina,” 115.

31. Ewbank, “My Name Is Marina,” 116.

invention. In the recognition scene, she becomes the living, breathing answer to her father's questions: "But are you flesh and blood? / Have you a working pulse and are no fairy?" (21.140–41). While Orgel has written movingly of the play's abandonment of Marina at its conclusion, noting that her father marries her to Lysimachus and that she "is given no options at all, not a single line, not a word of rejoicing or even of assent,"³² her important work of self-fashioning has already been done. Her lack of participation in the marriage match may suggest that the play abandons her; however, we have no sense, nor any evidence, that Marina has abandoned herself.

Looking at Shakespeare's use of the medieval author Gower as chorus and source, Edward Gieskes argues that the play's chaotic structure is at once produced, retained, and validated by its incorporation of capacious medieval narrative with its tolerance for asides and interruptions.³³ I suggest that Marina as narrator performs a similar function: she both frustrates expectations and authorizes the newly constructed narrative with which the play concludes. Pericles, a wretched wanderer at sea since the false news of Marina's death, and his queen Thaisa plan to live and reign in Pentapolis, while Marina and Lysimachus will settle in Tyre: the future is decided, and the past correctly reconstructed. *Pericles's* ending, though, like that of *The Winter's Tale*, does more than offer a tidy, comic resolution to the play. For the sense of coherence and stability with which the play concludes occurs on Marina's terms, reflects her capabilities as a narrator, and is made possible only by the play's dissolution of the formulaic female teen.

"Imperfection both in learning and age": Rachel Speght

Shakespeare's unsettling of youth through an intertextual construction of Marina in dramatic verse finds an interesting parallel in the prose, and especially in the nondramatic verse, of his young contemporary Rachel Speght. In 1617, Speght published *A Mouzell for Melastomous*, her tract defending women against Joseph Swetnam's misogynistic work, *The Araignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*. As Barbara K. Lewalski notes, Speght's tract is "the first, and may be the only, female contribution to the vigorous pamphlet

32. Orgel, introduction to *Pericles*, xlii.

33. Gieskes, "Chaucer," 94, 104.

war over women's place and role."³⁴ Speght's insistence on naming herself as an author recalls Marina's narrativizing of her own story: as Marina appropriates ancient forms of folktale and romance, Speght enters and adapts the Jacobean pamphlet debate, originating in the centuries-old *querelle des femmes*. Authorship constitutes self for Speght, as oral narrative does for Marina. In her careful appropriation and manipulation of the formal controversy, Speght explores an emergent subjectivity through her participation in both the male-dominated pamphlet war and the publication of her own verse. The real-life example of youthful subjectivity scripted by Speght offers a compelling comparison to Shakespeare's dramatic representation.

Speght's articulation of her own youth forms a key element of her sense of self as an author. An emphasis on her status as a young person figures prominently in both the dedication to *Mouzell*, where the nineteen year old apologizes to her readers for her "insufficiency in literature and tendernes in yeares,"³⁵ describing herself as "yong, and the unworthiest of thousands";³⁶ and in the dedication to the appended tract "Certaine Quaeres to the Bayter of Women," where she informs readers that she is "young in yeares, and more defective in knowledge."³⁷ This self-conscious positioning as both young and ignorant—what Lewalski calls a "modesty topos"³⁸—is tactical: she adopts an appropriately self-deprecating posture to gain entrance to the formal controversy and to be heard. But it is personal as well: readers witness, in both her prose tracts and particularly in her poetry, Speght working out a sense of self. She's interested in what it means for her to be not just a writer, but a young writer; thus age, as it relates to subjectivity, is a preoccupation in much of her work.

Speght, daughter of Calvinist minister James Speght, was unusually well educated for her time, and, as Helen Speight writes, "hers was a life of engagement in the political, religious, and social conflicts of her day."³⁹ Grounded in a classical curriculum, Speght's education was highly unconventional for a girl of her day: by the time she turned nineteen, she was versed in Latin, literature,

34. Lewalski, introduction to *Polemics and Poems*, xi.

35. Speght, *Mouzell*, 5.

36. Speght, *Mouzell*, 3.

37. Speght, "Certaine Quaeres," 31.

38. Lewalski, introduction to *Polemics and Poems*, xxii.

39. Speight, "Polemical Life," 449.

history, biblical studies, logic, and rhetoric,⁴⁰ and had developed something of a reputation as a young woman of learning.⁴¹ Her entrance into the *querelle des femmes* with the publication of *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, published under her own name and aimed at a female audience, illuminates the extent of her education and the pride she took in her learning. While most of her contemporary female writers chose devotional or advice literature, or translation⁴² as their subjects, Speght tackled the male rhetorical genre of the formal controversy, adapting it to her own ends.

Pamphlets written in defence of women, published in the early Tudor period by authors such as Elyot, Vaughan, Gosynhyll, and Agrippa, functioned as formal literary exercises, not as genuine expressions of interest in actual women. Authors wrote both defences and attacks; Gosynhyll wrote one of each, likely simultaneously. Linda Woodbridge has shown that even the defences were not intended to aid or support women:

[W]e have a succession of three defenses of women—Elyot’s, Vaughan’s, and Gosynhyll’s—all of which represent themselves as “defenses” against misogyny but whose traceable literary antecedents are not misogynistic attacks but other defenses. The clear implication is that these pieces were not composed as sincere and pious vindications of a maligned sex but as exercises in a literary genre.⁴³

Inaugurating the Jacobean phase of the formal controversy, Swetnam’s *Araignment* was likely the product of a cooperative effort between the author and his bookseller, Thomas Archer, to initiate a profitable debate, especially considering Swetnam’s provocative (albeit entirely conventional) prefatory material. His dedicatory epistles invite counterattacks: “I knowe women will barke more at me, then *Cerberus* the two headed Dog did at *Hercules*,” he writes, going on to acknowledge, “I knowe women will bite the lippe at me and censure hardly of me.”⁴⁴ Once the *Araignment* was published, Archer probably

40. Speight, “Polemical Life,” 451.

41. Lewalski, introduction to *Polemics and Poems*, xv.

42. Speight, “Polemical Life,” 453.

43. Woodbridge, *Women*, 24.

44. Swetnam, *Araignment*, A2.

commissioned Speght to write a response that would fuel the conflict and sell more books.⁴⁵

It is possible, then, to read Speght as unwittingly drawn into an old rhetorical game: perhaps unaware of the controversy's conventions and involuntarily employing them, she was more confined than liberated by her entry into the genre. Planning to ground her response to Swetnam in his weak logic and faulty writing, Speght complains in *Certaine Quaeres* that the *Araignment* is “a promiscuous mingle mangle” and “altogether without method.”⁴⁶ She goes on to critique his grammatical errors and the glaring inconsistencies in his argument, evincing a concern with formal literary standards that recalls male polemicists' preoccupation with rhetoric. Woodbridge has argued that Speght's “heavy emphasis on style is evidence that her objections to his work are primarily literary,” tempting though it might be to assume she takes offense to his misogyny because she is a woman;⁴⁷ she goes on to suggest that Speght likely had only a minimal grasp of the conventions of the formal controversy,⁴⁸ leading to her inadvertent collusion in a game she did not understand.

Speght's complaint, though, that Swetnam's lack of order in his tract prevents her from answering it “as a regular Responsarie requireth”⁴⁹ suggests her own response will itself be irregular, more an appropriation of, than a contribution to, this old game. She adopts a particular rhetorical posture, styling herself in the poems that preface *Mouzell* as “young encombatant,” a David to Swetnam's Goliath,⁵⁰ fleshing out her earlier self-representation in the dedication to her tract as a young writer seeking shelter “under the wings of you (Honourable personages) against the persecuting heate of this fierie and furious Dragon.”⁵¹ Depicting herself as young, ignorant, and helpless is central to Speght's appropriation; she creates her own rhetorical posture in a game propelled by posturing. The three prefatory poems—authored by Speght but attributed by her to Philalethes (lover of truth), Philomathes (lover

45. Lewalski, introduction to *Polemics and Poems*, xv.

46. Speght, “*Certaine Quaeres*,” 31.

47. Woodbridge, *Women*, 88.

48. Woodbridge, *Women*, 89.

49. Speght, “*Certaine Quaeres*,” 31.

50. Speght, “*In praise*,” 10.

51. Speght, *Mouzell*, 5.

of knowledge), and Favour B. (one who applauds or supports)—are grouped together under the heading “In praise of the Author and her Worke,” and serve as Speght’s self-reflexive commentary on both her young perspective and on her role as a newcomer to an old and established genre.

While she goes on to develop her persona as a writer in the prose tract itself, Speght’s prefatory poems stand out as particularly self-constitutive: here she steps outside the framework of the formal controversy, marking her entrance, as a girl, to this game played by men. In her verse, young Speght’s voice resonates outside the boundaries of the *querelle*. James Purkis calls her response to Swetnam in *Mouzell* “a remarkable operation of individualization,”⁵² and I suggest this is true of her poetry in particular. Developing her David and Goliath analogy, Speght describes her battle with Swetnam in the first poem:

For with an enemie to Women kind,
 she hath encountred, as each wight may see:
 And with the fruit of her industrious toyle,
 To this Goliath she hath given the foyle.
 Admire her much I may, both for her age,
 and this her Mouzell for a blacke-mouth’d wight [...]⁵³

Speght figures herself as an admirable combatant not only in terms of her industriousness in defending women but also in terms of her youth: the speaker commends both her *Mouzell* and “her age.” The combat analogy gathers force in the second poem as Speght likens her defence of women to the brave exploits of a soldier who “for his Countrie doth expose / himselfe unto the furie of his foe,”⁵⁴ while she also uses “Learnings Art” in her battle with Swetnam.⁵⁵ The third and final poem praises both Speght’s piety and her learning, while focusing particular attention on her age: she is

A Virgin young, and of such tender age,
 As for encounter may be deemed too weake,

52. Purkis, “Rachel Speght,” 116.

53. Speght, “In praise,” 10.

54. Speght, “In praise,” 10.

55. Speght, “In praise,” 11.

Shee having not as yet seene twenty yeares,
Though in her carriage older she appears.⁵⁶

Speght sets out to defend women in *Mouzell*, yet in these opening verses she evades categorizing herself as a woman; rather, she will write from both the lived experience and the rhetorical posture of a nineteen-year-old girl, addressing Swetnam from a subject position outside the one he attacks. Unsettling herself from fixed categories, Speght navigates around the rules of the game. The self-conscious, self-reflexive prefatory poems present Speght in many guises: she is a soldier, a scholar, a “pupill unto pietie,”⁵⁷ and a virgin. She is young, but claims not to look it. The instability and multiplicity of identity that Speght fabricates in this verse positions her work as a foil to Swetnam’s, whose urge to categorize women is evident in the *Araignment*. As Woodbridge explains, “like many of his contemporaries, Swetnam organizes his views of women by a kind of sexual taxonomy: the Renaissance rejoiced in systems of classification”; for women, this was usually “maid/wife/widow, plus whore.”⁵⁸ Speght’s evasion of such seemingly immutable categories is purposeful and tactical, and situates her to adapt and update the genre. To insist on her youth is to insist on an identity separate from those categories Swetnam would make available to her: Speght is not a maid, a wife, a widow, or a whore; she is a young girl, and as such can assume the much more unlikely and ambiguous role of Swetnam’s “undeserved friend.”⁵⁹

A fascinating record exists of what is most likely, according to Lewalski, Swetnam’s own reaction to Speght’s *Mouzell* and its prefatory poems: the Yale copy of *Mouzell* contains a male contemporary’s marginal responses, recorded in eighty-seven manuscript annotations. Lewalski’s edition of Speght’s work includes these marginalia in an appendix, where she also makes a convincing case for Swetnam’s authorship.⁶⁰ His strategies for dealing with Speght’s work constitute “early versions of what have proved to be quite durable methods for trying to keep subversive women in their place,”⁶¹ including sexual innuendo

56. Speght, “In praise,” 11.

57. Speght, “In praise,” 11.

58. Woodbridge, *Women*, 84.

59. Speght, *Mouzell*, 8.

60. Lewalski, “Appendix,” 91–92.

61. Lewalski, “Appendix,” 91.

and double entendres, as well as condescension to Speght's age and attacks on her chastity.⁶² In response to Speght's signing herself as his "undeserved friend," Swetnam remarks, "Kisse & bee freinds [*sic*]."⁶³ To the language in her verse, he responds particularly to "little" and "young": to Speght's self-styling as a "little David," he remarks, "Neaver to little if olde enough";⁶⁴ Speght's descriptor "young encombatant" he meets with "Neaver to younge if bigg enough."⁶⁵ Where Speght comments on her own age, noting that she seems older in "her carriage," Swetnam writes, "I have knowen those that have encounterd as valiant men as this at raw fifteene and have made them yielde their weapon. It seemes shee is of a good Carri-age."⁶⁶ And when, in "Certaine Quaeres," she professes to be "young in yeares," Swetnam snarls, "You speak like a mayd, not like a Virgin,"⁶⁷ a comment that is both a slur on her chastity and an attempt to categorize her. Swetnam's marginalia negate Speght's emphasis on her youth, as they also repeatedly sexualize her, undermining her efforts to claim a role for herself outside of sexual categories. Lewalski notes that these marginalia were likely never published and that Speght never read them;⁶⁸ however, that Swetnam was moved to write them suggests the extent to which her tract—and particularly her scripting of her own subjectivity in both the tract and its prefatory verse—posed a threat.

In the tract itself, Speght continues to author herself through her appropriation of the formal controversy, undoing versions of women constructed and perpetuated in this controversy generally, and more specifically, those penned by Swetnam, whose writings, says Speght, are "the very embleme of a monster."⁶⁹ Engaging in a rhetorical game, male writers in the controversy helped shape their culture's view of women, a stock representation not unlike the formulaic teen girl of folktale and romance lore, reimaged and staged by Shakespeare as his character Marina. Speght, though, like Shakespeare, interrogates this stale construction: as he appropriated folktale, she worked

62. Lewalski, "Appendix," 92.

63. Lewalski, "Appendix," 96.

64. Lewalski, "Appendix," 96.

65. Lewalski, "Appendix," 96.

66. Lewalski, "Appendix," 97.

67. Lewalski, "Appendix," 102.

68. Lewalski, "Appendix," 92.

69. Speght, *Mouzell*, 4.

within the established genre of the formal controversy, turning its conventions to her own advantage. As Lewalski points out, Speght’s tract “breaks the mold” of the formal controversy, “eschewing many of the tired formulaic gestures of the *querelle* defenses.”⁷⁰ She argues with vigor and intellect; Speight describes Speght’s work as “a self-conscious intellectual tour de force” that “displays her academic and rhetorical wares.”⁷¹ The *Mouzell* affords young Speght the opportunity to show off her considerable learning.

Speght’s title page announces her intent to respond to “*that Irreligious and Illiterate Pamphlet made by Io. Sw.*,”⁷² and indeed one of her key strategies is rhetorical one-upmanship, countering his flaws in logic and grammar by flaunting her own superior skills. As Purkis writes, Speght represents Swetnam’s tract as the “ranting of a blasphemous fool [...] [her] response is simply an answer to another writer’s work that demonstrates a superior sense of logic and a better understanding of scripture”;⁷³ Lewalski also points to Speght’s control of Latin, wordplay, and syllogisms:⁷⁴ “By this your hodge-podge of heathenish Sentences, Similies, and Examples,” Speght informs Swetnam, “you have set forth your selfe in your right colours, unto the view of the world.”⁷⁵ She in turn will set herself forth as intelligent, educated, and rational, becoming “the living refutation of Swetnam’s charges against women.”⁷⁶ At the level of rhetoric, then, Speght engages in the game; however, she surprises her readers by playing it more effectively than the male writer she’s responding to. She also wields rhetorical skill to her own particular ends, as a means of self-fashioning: surpassing mere rhetorical display, her tract employs language to construct an identity outside what Swetnam has depicted in his tract. The youthful identity Speght insists upon in her prefatory verse is foundational to the work of self-fashioning she performs in the tract proper.

Speght’s particular use of scripture in *Mouzell* is interesting not only in revealing an understanding superior to Swetnam’s but also in her leveraging of Biblical knowledge to advance an argument for a greater equality between men

70. Lewalski, introduction to *Polemics and Poems*, xxi.

71. Speight, “Polemical Life,” 452.

72. Speght, *Mouzell*, 1.

73. Purkis, “Rachel Speght,” 117–18.

74. Lewalski, introduction to *Polemics and Poems*, xxii.

75. Speght, *Mouzell*, 8.

76. Lewalski, introduction to *Polemics and Poems*, xxii.

and women. The *Mouzell's* foundation for this claim rests on Speght's reading of Genesis: woman cannot be man's inferior, 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 jointly, *Let them rule over the fish of the Sea, and over the foules of the Heaven, and over every beast that moveth upon the earth:* By which words, he makes their authority equall, and all creatures to be in subjection unto them both.⁷⁷

Building on this premise, Speght's "most radical" claims in support of female equality occur in her use of Galatians 3:28: "that *male and female are all one in Christ Jesus.*"⁷⁸ Speght brings this principle to bear later in the tract, applying, Lewalski notes, the parable of the talents to women:⁷⁹ "no power externall or internall ought women to keep idle, but to imploy it in some service of GOD, to the glorie of her Creator, and comfort of her own soule."⁸⁰ Speght goes on to claim that men should do their share of housework and childrearing, citing examples from nature as evidence: male pigeons take a turn sitting on the nest; other male birds help build nests and bring food for their mates.⁸¹

It is little wonder, given this line of argument, that Speght's text has often been read as a work of proto-feminism; however, Diane Purkiss argues convincingly that the desire to read Speght's work as feminist is a failure to contextualize: "because [texts signed by women] can so readily be situated in the context of gender politics, they are never fully situated in the political and discursive specificities of the early modern period."⁸² More recently, Christina Luckyj has sidestepped the familiar interpretation of Speght as a woman writing

77. Speght, *Mouzell*, 18.

78. Lewalski, introduction to *Polemics and Poems*, xxv.

79. Lewalski, introduction to *Polemics and Poems*, xxv.

80. Speght, *Mouzell*, 20.

81. Speght, *Mouzell*, 20–21.

82. Purkiss, "Material Girls," 70.

in opposition to men, placing her instead “within a community of writers, preachers, and publishers defined not by gender but by religious politics.”⁸³ In focusing on Speght’s self-fashioning, I too work somewhat outside the feminist framework as I look to the voice she develops as a young writer. This voice, its origins clear already in *Mouzell* and especially in its prefatory poems, develops more fully in her second volume, a work of verse titled *Mortalities Memorandum* (1621), which she prefaces with the poem “A Dreame.” The remainder of this essay will consider how Speght’s self-fashioning unfolds in this volume of poetry.

Of particular interest for my reading is the opening of the dedication to *Mortalities*, where Speght lays claim to a public position as writer:

Amongst diversitie of motives to induce the divulging of that to publique view, which was devoted to private Contemplation, none is worthy to precede desire of common benefit. Corne kept close in a garner feeds not the hungry; A candle put under a bushel doth not illuminate an house; None but unprofitable servants knit up Gods talent in a Napkin.⁸⁴

Her self-positioning here reveals a development of the tactical self-deprecation she employed four years earlier in dedicating her *Mouzell*; while in that tract her own ignorance was key to her authorial self-representation, the dedication to the volume of poetry is a more direct assertion of her own role as a writer. Indeed, in her address “To the Reader” that follows the dedication, Speght rejects a potential audience of “ignorant dunces,” soliciting instead a “courteous Reader” to whom she “rest[s] a true friend.”⁸⁵ Speght’s ownership of her intellect and her public role echoes through the remainder of the dedication, which she addresses to her godmother, Marie Moundford. Speght writes of Mrs. Moundford’s declaration of the baptismal vows that “hereby the world may wnesse, that the promise you made for me, when I could make none for myself, my carefull friends (amongst whom I must repute your ever esteemed selfe) have beene circumspect to see performed.”⁸⁶ Mrs. Moundford’s public

83. Luckyj, “*Mouzell for Melastomus* in Context,” 114.

84. Speght, *Mortalities*, 45.

85. Speght, *Mortalities*, 47.

86. Speght, *Mortalities*, 46.

proclamation on Speght's behalf presages the authorial voice she here adopts; once able to speak for herself, she does. As she asserts in the dedication, she wrote the volume of poetry, in part, to discredit claims that her father authored *Mouzell*: "I am now, as by a strong motive induced (for my rights sake) to produce and divulge this off-spring of my indeavour, to prove them futurely who have formerly deprived me of my due, imposing my abortive upon the father of me, but not of it."⁸⁷

Speght's continued "working out" of her role as a young writer is further evident in her poetry: while religious commonplaces dominate the verse of the conventional *Mortalities*, the poem often gestures as well towards her ongoing preoccupation with youthful subjectivity. Speght's earlier, tactical representation of her own youth was a means to shake herself loose of Swetnam's constraining categories and to find her way into an old debate; now twenty-four years old, she further interrogates in verse what indeed it means to be young, and, particularly in "A Dreame," what it means to be a young woman. In this autobiographical preface to *Mortalities*, Speght imagines journeying through a place named Cosmos, where, dismayed to find herself "wanting wisdom,"⁸⁸ she meets Thought, who directs her to Age and Experience. Tracing an allegorical journey from ignorance to knowledge, Speght considers the position of a young woman seeking education. As Linda Vecchi has argued, "as a record and as a re-enactment of the process of Speght's personal education, ["A Dreame"] stands as the first printed book of humanist instruction written in English *by a woman* specifically *for women*. As such, it places Speght squarely within the humanist tradition of writers on education, such as Erasmus, Mulcaster and Milton."⁸⁹

The importance of women's education factors into Speght's perception of herself as a young woman writer. She imagines that Thought appears to her, "inquiring what I was, and what I would, / And why I seem'd as one disconsolate."⁹⁰ Speght explains, "I, as a stranger in this place abide [...] The reason of my sadnesse at this time, / Is, 'cause I feele myself not very well."⁹¹

87. Speght, *Mortalities*, 45.

88. Speght, "Dreame," 49.

89. Vecchi, "Lawful avarice," 6.

90. Speght, "Dreame," 49.

91. Speght, "Dreame," 49.

She feels grief, and names that grief *Ignorance*.⁹² While this conversation with Thought recalls, to a degree, Speght’s earlier rhetorical posturing as an ignorant young girl in the dedication to *Mouzell*, it points at the same time to her new interrogation of youthful identity. The poem explores her growth beyond Ignorance, her defiance of Disswasion, and her encounters with Knowledge, Erudition, Truth, and Industrie. Late in the poem, Speght introduces Swetnam, figuring him as a “full fed Beast, / Which roared like some monster, or a Devill.”⁹³ Speght invokes her role as author here, “bind[ing] his chaps” with her *Mouzell*, and includes a satiric representation of the self-important Ester Sovernam, one of Swetnam’s pseudonymous attackers. Speght contrasts her own role as an author with this “selfe-conceited Creature.”⁹⁴

Investigating Speght’s movement from the pamphlet wars to the genres of dream allegory and *ars moriendi*, Elaine Beilin insists that readers “not imagine this as a retreat from her public defense of women, but rather a new tactic, because when Speght sets out to rewrite, she is a serious reviser.”⁹⁵ Beilin notes in particular Speght’s allusion to Virgil when she writes of Industrie’s promise to “cut away / All obstacles, that in her way can grow, / And by the issue of her owne attempte, / I’le make thee *labor omnia vincet* know.”⁹⁶ Stressing that labour—not love—conquers all, Speght attempts to “validate the female experience of intellectual work.”⁹⁷ Her expression of a sense of herself as a young but public author, which began in the *Mouzell* and was further articulated in the poetry volume’s dedication, comes to lively fruition in verse, and especially in the figures and allusions of “A Dreame.”

As Speght goes on in *Mortalities* to consider the trials and grief intrinsic to every stage of life, she emphasizes both the fleeting and the burdensome nature of youth, noting that “*Juventus* sodeinly doth fly away, / *Adolescence* makes but little stay [...] *Youth* is incumbred with untimely harms.”⁹⁸ Youth is figured as

92. Speght, “Dreame,” 49.

93. Speght, “Dreame,” 58.

94. Speght, “Dreame,” 58.

95. Beilin, “Writing Public Poetry,” 268.

96. Speght, “Dreame,” 52.

97. Beilin, “Writing Public Poetry,” 269.

98. Speght, *Mortalities*, 69.

vulnerable: Speght imagines “youthfull years” succumbing to “old ages lot”;⁹⁹ she points out that “youthfull prime” and “Virilitie”¹⁰⁰ are as susceptible to death as old age, and insists that young men, even if they escape death, “may faile.”¹⁰¹ This sense of youth’s frailty and vulnerability is both a conventional feature of the *ars moriendi* and suggestive of Speght’s bidding farewell to her youth and to her role as an author: she was married later that year, ending her writing career. Vecchi suggests that “Speght enjoyed the bounty of a paradise of learning, but because of her status as a woman, it is a paradise lost”; the loss of her vocation turns the *Dreame* “into a nightmare.”¹⁰²

And yet, in the work that we are fortunate to have, Speght’s development of voice and identity is clear. In her prose tract and particularly in her verse, readers bear witness to the construction and interrogation of a youthful subjectivity. Her writing offers a fascinating glimpse of an early modern girl as an author, while it stands also as an interesting parallel to the rendering of an adolescent female subject by a contemporary male dramatist. For Marina and Speght, self-fashioning inheres in a reimagining and a reconstituting of old forms: in creating Marina, Shakespeare adapts and updates elements of folktale and romance, opening a metatheatrical space in which the fourteen year old can shape the story of her own life. A few years later, Speght would wade into the *querelle*, carefully appropriating its conventions as she battled misogyny and claiming her own subject position as a young writer quite outside Swetnam’s fixed and destructive norms. Her poetry, and particularly “A Dreame,” which adapts the genre of romance, sees her authorial voice reach its fruition.

Vecchi may be right: perhaps, as a married woman, Speght did lose paradise. It is true that she ceased to publish after her marriage, and her public voice fell silent. The loss is similar to Marina’s, who, once given in marriage by her father, has no further role to play in *Pericles*. Still, Marina as reimagined folktale princess stands as a remarkable depiction of early modern youth, while Speght’s scripting of her own youthful subjectivity intervenes forcefully in her culture’s representation of women. Both girls, real and invented, are authors to themselves in all.

99. Speght, *Mortalities*, 79.

100. Speght, *Mortalities*, 80.

101. Speght, *Mortalities*, 83.

102. Vecchi, “‘Lawfull avarice,’” 6.

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