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Eighteenth-Century Female Education: From Mary Astell's Conservadorism to Catharine Macaulay's Radicalism

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Abstract: The eighteenth-century represented a moment of intense debate in what concerns female education, the milestone of the "Custom Law" contest which had long perpetuated the inferiority of women, and had confined them to the private domestic sphere. Thus, the defence of the right to education must be understood in a broader context, i.e. the defence of the intellectual equality of genders. In fact, the English Feminism is closely linked to the issue of female education, as the example of the literary course of writers such as Mary Astell and Catharine Macaulay proves. Following a long literary tradition, we find in the eighteenth-century a great apologetic rhetoric concerning women's role and participation in society. Until then, women were considered the moral arbiters and keepers of good costumes, thus playing a vital role in ensuring the domestic and social stability. But now some women wished for higher goals in life and with more relevance to the society. Therefore, this century was marked by deep changes and convulsion in what concerns the social mentalities, especially the way women were regarded and the role they played within society, as the intense debate (much influenced by the revolutionary winds blown from France and North America that encouraged women to exhibit a more vindicative posture) about women's rights, not only concerning educational rights, the most important issue in the early century, but also civic and political ones, more obviously at the end of the century.

Keywords: Female Education, Eighteenth-Century, Mary Astell, Catharine Macaulay

Article

The Eighteenth-Century in England adjusted itself to intense changes at a social level, particularly in what concerns how women were seen and the role they performed within society. This fact is easily observed if we consider the intense debate concerning women's rights, not only about educational issues (the keynote in the beginning of the century), but also at the civic and political level, in a more obvious way at the end of the century, much favoured by the revolutionary winds blown from France and North America that encouraged women to exhibit a far more vindicative position.

In this study it is my aim to analyse the female educational models throughout the eighteenth-century in England. Considering such a long period, that is, from the reign of the last Stuarts after the Restoration to its *terminus*, and acknowledging the French Revolution (1789) as a decisive historical turning-point, I will examine the proposals of two authoresses that mirrored distinct patterns of the feminine educational model. The key-goal of such proposals consisted of the acknowledgement of the need for a better education, one that would enable women to acquire useful learning on every subject other than domestic expertise. Our study begins with the analysis of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest* (1694), by Mary

Astell, and its impact at the time. We, then, proceed to the analysis of Catharine Macaulay's vindicative text, *Letters on Education with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (1790), a perfect example of the radicalism of the 1790s.

It is noteworthy that, in order to address any given period, one must take into account the most significant events relating to the subject in question. As Jeremy Black highlights:

Periodisation is always a problem in history, a subject that struggles with the complex identities and relationships of change and continuity. To choose dates is to define a period and to confer an apparent identity and thus unity on it. To periodise the past is to suggest frontiers in time that necessarily complicate issues of change and continuity by implying an apparent basis for them.[1]

Therefore, as I wish to identify and compare educational treatises and their relation to reality throughout the eighteenth-century, I consider, for coherence sake, this period from the Glorious Revolution of 1688, since it was a turning point in English history when the political, religious and economical changes gave way to a change in society that, inevitably, would alter the women's way of life. The Industrial Revolution, much more visible in the second half of the eighteenth-century, was also an important vector of the awakening of consciousness to the plight of women. If, on the one hand, the lower classes enjoyed a greater freedom since they could work outside, away from home, on the other hand, their working conditions were, to say the least, degrading. The most humiliating jobs were destinated to women and the factories reflected the structure of the domestic space, almost as a macro-sphere of the *domus*. However, the technological development the Revolution allows, undoubtedly, brings changes in women's lives and paves the way for numerous mutations in the social context, given the enhancement of the so-called leisure industry and the consequent attention to the playful nature of the social life for the middle and upper classes.

This period reaches its *terminus* in the 1790s with the aftermath of the French Revolution which, in turn, marks the beginning of a new era with deep repercurssions in England, as the new ideals inspired debates that threatened the relative political and economic stability observed since 1688. At this time female education became an issue of concern and debate more than ever before.

Most of the educational authors – men and women alike – agreed in admitting that the academic *curriculum* for women was extremely limited, encompassing only external accomplishments such as sewing, dance, embroidery and, occasionally, a little of French and Italian, not fulfilling the real purpose of education: to provide women with a rational mind, allowing them to resist and reject the so called vices and temporal passions such as vanity and luxury and, concumitantly, to acknowledge the benefits of leading their life according to the Christian principles. Only in this way could women ascend spiritually and, during the process, become better mothers, wives, companions and, ultimately, better persons. It was necessary, for this reason, to educate them, not only to know and understand their designated role, performing it as best as they could, but also so that their obligations could be carried out, both in the domestic and social sphere and, even if indirectly, in the political and economic sphere.

Such line of debate was commonly used since the beginning to the end of the century, and stemmed from the general conviction that women were the arbiters of morals and good manners, performing an essential role not only in the family but also in the nation stability. Women, however, saw in this assumption the trampoline that allowed them to

gain access to a more complete education with a much more solid economic and constitutional applicability.

At the beginning of the century we encounter the pioneer Mary Astell, one of the first authoresses to defend a female educational course that would cover more than the domestic micro-social sphere. Astell lives in the Post-Restoration period (1660), when the nation strands away from the authoritarian patterns, not only at the public level, but also at the private one, previously imposed by Oliver Cromwell in England during his *CommonWealth* govern. The Restoration meant the return to the throne of the Stuarts and, subsequently, a greater freedom and even a relative tolerance in what people's behaviour was concerned, although such atmosphere began to change during the Reign of William of Orange and Mary Suart and, even more severely, in the time of Queen Anne.

In fact, the reign of Charles II (known as *The Merry Monarch)* was marked by its support to arts and public amusement, such as the theater, considered by many to be an activity and an area of licentiousness and, by others, as a sign of freedom of thought and expression. It was a moment when the city public life was bustling, favoured by the commercial blooming, altering consumer habits and even questioning the social hierarchies from the past. Despite the commitment to the maintenance of traditional values and morality, the reign of the last Stuarts favoured the hustle and bustle that the leisure industry and urban work brought about, and enabled the critical spirit and the nationalwide debate. The famous "coffee-houses" and "chocolate houses" were privileged spaces for this analysis of the public life and so was the the print industry which developed as never before, with numerous publications coming out, or at least, becoming more regular as, for example, *The Tatler*[2], *The Female Tatler*[3] *and The Spectator*[4]. The female cause thus profits from a greater and a much more comprehensive divulgation. Almost all female writings were reviewed in journals and periodicals and the authoresses were satirized in plays, celebrated in paintings and in poetry, and their private lives were scrutinized in the newspapers, eager for scandalous details.

Mary Astell benefits from the fostering enlightened attitude that consisted in the thriving for knowledge. Almost at the end of this century, Kant would define the Enlightment as the boldness of knowledge[5], and Astell definitely encapsulates that notion. However, if, on the one hand, the forementioned changes inspired in the authoress the desire to offer a better learning opportunity to her younger contemporaries, on the other hand, the ubiquitous concern during the reign of Queen Anne to preserve and comply with moral traditional behaviours, justifies, in a certain way, the rather rigid and conservative attitude of Mary Astell.

In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest* (1694), Astell suggests the establishment of an Academy for women, where they could develop and strengthen their minds, thus becoming actually helpful to their peers and, therefore, to all society. The authoress considered that only through faith and the practice of a reasoned and conscious Christianity could women ascend spiritually and fulfil the purpose predetermined by the Creator, the most important mission to be accomplished throughout their lives. The religiosity that permeates the whole of the argumentative line of Astell's essay is perfectly consistent with the eighteenth-century profile of the ideal woman as pure, virtuous and pious, performing a decisive role in the maintenance of the national values and standards. Nonetheless, the authoress, despite

enthusiastically supporting the women's right to education and criticizing the female intellectual state of subordination in relation to men, never abandons the intensely conservative principles she obeyed herself, nor at any time disputes the male authority.
The fore mentioned emphasis on the importance of the pure, virtuous and pious woman, qualities constantly invoked as hegemonic, was, moreover, always present in the speech of various authors who looked into the subject all over the century. They believed that women had the patriotic obligation to contribute to save their country. However, by the end of the century we begin to observe a slightly different tone concerning the writings about women's condition and their education. In fact, the 1790's authoresses were rather frequently labelled as "radicals", with the exception of figures such as Hannah More, who continued to promote the *status quo*. The apparent authoresses' radicalism sprang from the extremely revolutionary climate that arose during this period, and the new *avant-garde* ideas conveyed by several female writings. Catharine Macaulay publishes her works precisely in this decade, with a quite different agenda from the writers of the beginning of the century, defending the gender social and political parity and, at the same time, advocating an active participation of women in political life. Macaulay lives in troubled times, with the French Revolution of 1789 functioning as the stirring of consciousness and breaking with the set standards. Numerous essays emerged applauding the revolution and wishing for its spread to other countries, as Thomas Paine's and William Godwin's works demonstrate[6]. However, several dissonant voices also came out, such as Edmund Burke, the first English author to criticize the revolution, alerting to the threats of an economic and civilizational recession[7], regarding it as a violent revolt that was endangering the traditional values[8], which generated a reaction from Macaulay herself, imbued with the optimistic spirit so common at this time[9]. The authoress was directly influenced by the European Enlightenment, which shaped a generalized optimism about the human being abilities and played an important role in rising awareness to the female educational needs. In fact, it was commonly accepted in the intellectual circles that the female character failures and flaws were a direct consequence of the deficient and inadequate education traditionally given to women. All writers who dealt with this topic were unanimous in recognizing that only a thorough review of the female educational model would allow women to develop intellectually.
In *Letters on Education with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (1790), Catharine Macaulay proposes an educational model that would be valid for both sexes, refusing to address female education as a separate topic and always insisting in an identical *curriculum* for boys and girls alike whose chief purpose would be to develop the same wisdom and virtue, the only way to achieve a society that could progress not only socially, but also in economic and political aspects. She criticizes the total separation between the education of boys and girls, considering that the very idea that the female education should be of an opposite kind to that of the male was a catastrophic mistake, designed to keep women in a position of subordination. Like several authors of this period, Macaulay rejected the restricted nature of fashionable education imposed by false ideas of *decorum* and called for coeducation, condemning the objectives of the existing systems. The writer stresses the vital importance of education believing that "of all the arts of life, that of giving useful instruction to the human mind, and of rendering it the master of its affections, is the most important[10]".
Both Mary Astell and Catharine Macaulay were the result of, and reflected context particularities in their works, living in troubled times, thus favourable to a greater

vindicative posture and a greater permeability and tolerance regarding changes in social and political affairs. Although both writers were primarily commited in conceding a better education to women, there are fundamental differences in their works, namely the educational model proposed. Mary Astell defended the creation of an Academy where women could live and educate themselves, dedicated, exclusively, to their spiritual and intellectual improvement. This authoress was peremptory in rejecting any contact of the "pupils" with the outside world, pointing out, however, the exceptional nature of charity works: they could contact with the poor and least-favoured in order to provide them assistance. The reason that Astell presents relates to that fact that the female minds were not strong enough to resist the worldly temptations of social life, needing, thefore, to concentrate in the strengthening of their minds until they were prepared to return to their usual social circle. Catharine Macaulay is absolutely against Mary Astell´s idea of the young women's isolation during the learning process. The essayist not only even suggests, as defends a joint education of boys and girls, with a common *curriculum* and physical activities, in the same material and temporal space.

Unlike Astell, who simply drafts general guidelines regarding the subjects to teach and some hobbies, Macaulay prepares an extensive reading list, as well as the issues to be addressed, both carefully sorted according to the young apprentice's stage and age. However, the list that she presents is so extensive that one must wonder if such programme would be viable within the set time limits. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy the emphasis in the total equality of requirements necessary for boys and girls, the only way to assure the complete intellectual development of both.

Also politically and religiously the two writers in question are at opposite ends of the spectrum: while Mary Astell believes piously in the divine right of the monarch, supporting the Conservative *Tories* and never questioning the supremacy of the Anglican Church in her thought and conduct, Catharine Macaulay declares herself a Republican and a Liberal, rejecting any conservative principles derived from the *status quo*, which is more than perceptible in her writings and in her unorthodox conduct. Probably, had Astell been a contemporary of Macaulay, she would had firmly disapproved her way of life, because it was truly outrageous for the epoch standards and, therefore, contrary to the acceptable and expected female conduct. In fact, even Macaulay's contemporaries disapproved of many of her life options, which generated great criticism, and even caused disaffection or rejection regarding her works, a growing attitude during the Victorian period. Although her behavior attracted attention, as it happens with all social scandals, that fact would not increase the books sale, since the stain of her personal reputation brought about the denigration of her literary reputation and even raised doubts concerning her abilities as a writer.

Despite their ideological divergences, both Mary Astell and Catharine Macaulay were rather straightforward in regretting the inferiority of women in relation to men and claiming for an extensive education that allowed the female intellectual development. It can even be considered that the enthusiastic defence of the right to education was based on a broader plan of claiming, the defence of intellectual equality, since both sexes had, *a priori*, identical intellectual rational abilities, the only difference consisting in the use of such abilities.

The examples of Astell and Macaulay show that sortings based on exhaustive dichotomies, either of political partisanship, as between *Tories* and *Whigs*, or ethical, as between virtuous conduct and scandal, or social, as between public and private, are not

enough. They seem even reductive when the life and work of women writers of the eighteenth-century are analysed. The division between public and private, or rather, the separation of the specific roles for each gender, did, indeed, exist throughout the century, but it was a weak separation, permeable and exposed to regular renegotiation, especially, or more obviously, at the end of the century. Catharine Macaulay represents, in a certain way, a process of secularization of Mary Astell's arguments, consistent with a much more materialistic view, focused on the earthly life that the commercial capitalism, and then the industries, led to, and that, politically, the American and mainly the French Revolution enhanced. People sought for solutions to their problems in this earthly plan, not waiting for divine justice in a *post-mortem* fate. The revolutionary ideology brought about the notions of meritocracy and the abolition of the birth privilege, in a certain way, transposed (or was transposable) to the debate about the gender discriminations. Once questioned the pyramid of classes, where the social structure was based on, it was also possible to undermine other hierarchies and sources of authority.

Though a superficial analysis of the two authoresses' writing discloses opposite ideologies, a closer look reveals that they are actually very much in tune in their concern about women's rights, fighting against the lower role that was designed to them within the society. I believe that the arguments used by Catharine Macaulay are the result of a maturation process from Mary Astell's, adapted to the social reality of the 1790's. Macaulay, although probably not aware of it, was strongly influenced by her ancestors' heritage For example, Macaulay would not accept Astell's religious and monarchical options because she considered them the antithesis of the freedom and equality she wanted for her generation. The ability in questioning the theories and practices acquired in a rational way and focused on women prospered, thus, in many directions, supporting and developing the process of women's awareness.

The work of Astell is reflected on the writings that emerged long after her death, constituing a valuable legacy not only for the nineteenth century women, but also for all who are interested in women's History. The contribution of Macaulay was also incalculable, as she was a pioneer in the invasion of the homocentric world, acting, writing and defending her opinions as intellectually comparable with men's.

However, the concept of equality between men and women is not an exhaustive cause, or something that generates consensus. It is a double-crossing notion, exposed to regular reformulation, once it results on the theory of the equality between sexes, which, as Catharine A. MacKinnon refers, is a contradiction in terms:

According to the approach to sex equality that has dominated politics, law and social perception, equality is an equivalence, not a distinction, and sex is a distinction. The legal mandate of equal treatment – which is both a systematic norm and a specific legal doctrine – becomes a matter of treating the likes a like and unlikes unlike; and sexes are defined as such by their mutual unlikeness. Put another way, gender is socially constructed as difference epistemologically; sex discrimination law bounds gender equality by difference doctrinally. A built-in tension exists between this concept of equality, which presupposes sameness, and this concept of sex, which presupposes difference. Sex equality thus becomes a contradiction in terms, something of an oxymoron, which may suggest why we are having such a difficult time getting it.[11]

Thus, I think that the notion of equality in this case is something that will be impossible to achieve, as it assumes a basic sexual equality, which is a misleading notion.

Nevertheless, this is not an obstacle to intellectual parity and socio-political construct of gender that respects its entirety in the same way, whether female or male. Instead of the well-known concept of "Superman", we should consider that of “Superwoman”, since she has the same functions and political and social duties as a man, at least in theory in the democratic states, and, in addition, her maternity, which distinguishes her from her male counterparts and, at the same time, gives her a greater and a more special power in what concerns the fate of Humanity.

The concept of Feminism had been suffering numerous reformulations but there is no consensus in its definition, and it just seems not achievable. Although women have identical legal and civil rights, its implementation is not practical, since the power entities are still dominated by men. The answer may rely in a positive discrimination (supported by the *Gender Feminism*[12]) which aims to abolish completely the distinction of gender, or, particularly, their roles, proposing to present some basic advantages on women, so that it creates a true equality between sexes. On the another perspective, the *Equity Feminism* reacts with an ideology that posits a complete civic and legal equality: “Most […] women subscribe philosophically to the […] kind of feminism whose main goal is equity, especially in politics and education”[13]. However, if we take a good look at the contemporary reality, this is already provided constitutionally, even if the current way of living does not prove it.

Therefore, and not taking away any merit from the eighteenth-century writers, I believe that the answer to the inequality does not ly only in education, since nowadays women have a total and free access to the Academies. The woman remains, as Simone de Beauvoir mentioned, the “Second Sex”[14], the Other. Despite the efforts to improve the status of women, Astell and Macaulay still considered man as a model, aiming to obtain the same rights and the same opportunities. The feminine concept continued, and in a certain way continues, to be defined as opposed to the masculine, being, for this reason, impossible to reach a definition of essence.

The only way to achieve social justice between men and women is the inclusion of women in positions of authority and power, a power to be shared between human beings apart from their sexual or gender classification. Paths are made by walking and remembering the steps of our ancestors, though timid and insufficient, does not take from them the typical greatness of pioneers.

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[4] Periodical published in London by the essayists Sir Richard Steele and Joseph Addison from March 1, 1711, to Dec. 6, 1712 (appearing daily), and subsequently revived by Addison in 1714.

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