

## CATHARINE MACAULAY: AN UNSEX'D FEMALE

**Patricia Rodrigues**

*University of Lisbon, Portugal, and Higher School of Education of Santarem, Portugal*

In 1978 Richard Polwhele published “The Unsex’d Females: A Poem”, which exemplifies the condemnatory rhetoric that stigmatized several women writers of the late eighteenth-century, including Catharine Macaulay. Female writers of this time were regarded with suspicion, especially if they addressed subjects such as religion or politics, thus breaking out of their proper, private sphere. Recent criticism has even pointed out that the mere act of writing was seen as subversive, as the pen was considered a symbolic phallus, therefore unsexing. The article explores how those female writers, particularly Catharine Macaulay, challenged the traditional political, social and sexual hierarchies and values, and how they were condemned and ostracized on account of their writings and beliefs, by their contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Catharine Macaulay, Unsex’d, females, Richard Polwhele, Eighteenth Century

### Article

The role of women was a subject of increasing debate during the late eighteenth century, and this was mirrored in the intensification of the debate surrounding female’s nature and education, particularly because it was a time of great social unrest in Britain. The political turmoil observed abroad, especially in France and in America created a generalized climate of instability, as the traditional institutions and hierarchies were being examined and contested. Therefore, this was a privileged moment to reassess contemporary notions of women’s nature, their abilities and their role. Women were traditionally regarded as arbiters of morals and manners, thus playing a vital role in ensuring social stability. Virtuous and pious women were believed to have a crucial role in maintaining the nation’s well-being and values. However, that was about to change in the course of the eighteenth century, when we observe an apologetic rhetoric for women’s education and intellectual development, that would enable them to acquire a true rational understanding. These claims were seen as a threat to such stability, and were strongly condemned by the male-dominated society.

The Enlightenment, prevalent at this time, was a moment of social and intellectual blooming and created opportunities to evaluate women’s rights. The ideals expressed by Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau contributed to this vindicative atmosphere, as they gave way to a discourse about equality, though focused on the abolition of classes’ differentiation, in some cases also contemplated the end of the divide between sexes. Thus, women could, and at least some did, participate in this vindicative movement. However, the practical concretization of such participation would only come centuries after. The sources of authority and power at the time

enforced male superiority and confined women to a secondary role within the domestic space, the only considered appropriate for their sphere of action. One of the key-dates of this period was the French Revolution of 1789, whose ideals inspired many women across the English Channel and created a climate wherein the role of women and the relation between the sexes became the subject of an increasing debate. This political, religious and social tempestuous atmosphere provided the opportunity for women to reassess and redefine their roles and for some British women, such as Catharine Macaulay, the French and American revolutions gave way to enticing possibilities for their own nation. France and America were seen almost as possible steps for the advancement of the republican cause in England.

It follows that, in the later part of the eighteenth-century, the nature of female education would be strongly criticized by some authors that defended the intellectual parity between both sexes. Existing educational systems were fiercely contested for neglecting women's intellectual development and for focusing merely on appearance and domestic accomplishments, therefore encouraging female temporal passions, such as vanity and the desire for luxury.

In the 1790s the debate around female education intensified due to the voice of several women who ventured to write about such a topic, even though they realized they would be strongly criticized for doing so. These women denounced the disadvantageous economic and legal situation of women within the institution of marriage, condemned the poor education that was given to them, and deplored the lack of alternatives to marriage in what means of subsistence and professional opportunities were concerned. They asserted women's equality to men and criticized male privilege and domination. Such women who challenged the notion of what was regarded as feminine were called "masculine" or "unsex'd", believed to neglect their husbands, their offspring and their homes, the traditional priorities attributed to women's existence. To such sexist considerations, women responded that educated females were a danger to men, as it would prove that they had identical capacities, being able to equal and even be superior to men. Mary Robinson summarizes the threat of a *female savant*: Prejudice (or policy) has endeavoured [...] to cast an odium on what is called *masculine women*; or, to explain the meaning of the word, a woman of enlightened understanding.<sup>1</sup>

It was even believed that knowledge unsexed women, depriving them of their interest and beauty, making them less desirable companions, as William Rose says:

Intense thought spoils a lady's features; it banishes *les ris et les graces* which form all the enchantment of a female face, Who ever saw Cupid hovering over a severe and studious brow? And who would not keep at awful distance from a fair one, who looks with all the gravity of a Greek professor? Besides, severe thought, it is well known, anticipates old age, makes the forehead wrinkle and hair turn grey... In truth, it is every way dangerous for while they are wrapt in a profound reverie they may lose – we don't know what they may lose.<sup>2</sup>

Women who dared to challenge the social conventions were viciously attacked and the rhetoric used was indeed virulent. A perfect example of these caustic attacks that stigmatized women writers of the late eighteenth-century is Richard Polwhele's "The Unsex'd Females: A Poem", published in 1798, in which he censures the transgressive females and praises the so-called "proper ones". However, Polwhele does not condemn all women writers, just the ones that broke out of their proper, private sphere and addressed topics considered unsuited for women. The authors whose works were rooted in the private sphere, such as private diaries and letters, or whose writings expressed the approved female conduct and exemplified the traditional feminine characteristics, such as sensibility and chastity, were not only approved but also labelled as proper. Female authors' life and work were reviewed in journals and periodicals, satirized in plays, celebrated in poetry and paintings, and gossiped about in newspapers. They were under

constant scrutiny, not only professionally but also in regard to their personal behaviour. Writing was not necessarily frowned upon, but the subjects addressed and the genres used were of crucial importance in the reception of their works. The ones who addressed topics such as religion, female education, morals and manners, were treated with more indulgence than the ones who ventured in subjects considered the province of men, especially politics.

As it has been said before, women were constantly under the scope of society and every misconduct or deviation from the expected conduct could make irreparable harm to their reputation and therefore, to their status within the society. Women writers in particular were at all times monitored as they could be easily condemned for overstepping the line of female propriety, and even considered traitors to their sex and, ultimately, to their nation. Recent criticism has even pointed out that for some, the mere act of using a pen for publication purposes was deemed subversive as the pen might be considered a symbolic phallus, therefore unsexing female writers. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definition of the word "unsex": "deprive of gender, sexuality, or the characteristic attributes of one or other sex"<sup>3</sup>. And this was precisely what Polwhele had in mind when he wrote his poem, although he recognized no harm was done when proper women wrote about morals and manners, enforcing the traditional female roles. In his poem, Richard Polwhele, concerned about the influence of the "Gallic freaks", makes a satiric critique of the proto-feminist principles expounded by Mary Wollstonecraft and her followers. As a matter of fact, the "Gallic freaks", who criticized social, political and religious institutions, called for a reform in mentalities and praised certain aspects of the French Revolution, were the "unsex'd" ones Polwhele refers to, as it was considered unnatural and transgressive for women, as the gentle sex, to harbour intellectual thinking, to desire to be the equals to men, or to meddle in public or political affairs. All of these actions were regarded with great disapproval and these women labelled as subversive examples to their kind. Polwhele thinks of a female savant as a creature devoid of her "natural" sex, giving opinions in areas that were forbidden to them. Although Catharine Macaulay isn't mentioned in the actual poem, Polwhele does make a clear reference to her in one of his notes to the text, as she would fit perfectly in the author's notion of unsex'd.

Macaulay, in her *Letters on Education* (1790) proposes an educational model that would be valid for both sexes, refusing to address female education as a separated 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 at a social level, but also at an economic and political one. She criticizes the total separation between the education of boys and girls, considering that the very idea that the education of females 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 of education:

The accomplishments were, of course, designed to enhance a girl's value in the marriage-market, and increasingly they were ousting the more sober and serviceable qualities of housewifery.<sup>4</sup>

When addressing character building, Catharine Macaulay believed that society played a far more important role than nature. She considered that the faults attributed to women were not related to their natural qualities but to their education and their place in society, stating:

All those vices and imperfections which have been generally regarded as inseparable from the female character, do not in any manner proceed from sexual causes, but are entirely the effects of situation and education<sup>5</sup>.

When examining the role played by women, the nature of their education (moral, intellectual, and social) reveals itself of particular relevance, Macaulay, as many other authors, mostly female, believed that women's errors and misconducts were entirely the product of their deficient education that did not equip them with a sound mind, rather made them more susceptible to vices and temptations. The growing demands for a reform in female education reveals that this was a fluid time, suggesting the potential for at least some change in the condition of women.

In the case of Catharine Macaulay, her *History of England from the accession of James I to that of the Brunswick line* (1763-83) was generally well received and even lauded. However, it was when Macaulay became more outspoken about her political beliefs, showing her fervid republicanism and subsequent claims for social reform, and married William Graham, twenty six years her junior and socially inferior, that she was shunned by society. At this time, capital importance was given to female writers' personal reputation and their conduct, bearing a great impact in their critical reception and public fame and recognition. So, Macaulay's loss of personal respectability contributed to a decrease in her literary reputation, and even a belief in the loss of her literary skills. This author paid the consequences of such misconducts and deviations of the accepted feminine behaviour. Although her abilities as a writer were not affected, yet the public interest in her work lessened. As an anonymous writer pointed out,

Perhaps there never was an instance, where personal conduct of an author so much influenced the public opinion of their writings. We perceive no diminution of the powers [...] [Catharine Macaulay] displayed, and was allowed to possess, yet the ridicule which has been thrown out against her, on occasion of her marriage, has totally extinguished all curiosity about her opinions on those important subjects which she formerly discussed, with so much credit to herself, and, we think, with so much advantage to the world.<sup>6</sup>

Although Macaulay enjoyed a solid reputation at her time, at least as an historian, she would fall into oblivion in the nineteenth and greater part of the twentieth century probably due to the factors before mentioned, namely the strict separation of spheres during the Victorian period and almost until the break of the World Wars. Recent scholars have shown deep interest in Macaulay, placing her in her righteous place as a contributor to her kind's intellectual development and self-consciousness. In the words of Jonathan Wordsworth, "Whatever criterion it is judged – scope, thoroughness, intellectual quality – Macaulay's work is formidable"<sup>7</sup>.

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