

**THE SO-CALLED FIRST FEMINISTS: ORTHODOXY AND INNOVATION IN
ENGLAND'S SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DISCUSSION
OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT. *This essay examines the writings of women's education advocate Bathsua Makin (1608-1675) in an effort to determine to what extent they were the product of traditional print debates about women and to what extent they were the innovative foundation for the ideas of Mary Astell (1668-1731), whose efforts on behalf of women have been deemed feminist by twentieth-century scholars. Through a close reading of Makin's treatise, *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673), a contextualisation of her ideas with the *querelle des femmes* genre and an examination of both overlapping and distinguishing elements of her work and that of Astell, this essay argues for a reassessment of the importance of Makin's contribution to the seventeenth-century debate of women's education.*

Keywords: women's education, Bathsua Makin, Mary Astell, *querelle des femmes* genre, feminism, seventeenth-century.

**LAS LLAMADAS PRIMERAS FEMINISTAS:
ORTODOXIA E INNOVACIÓN EN EL DEBATE
SOBRE LA EDUCACIÓN DE LAS MUJERES
EN LA INGLATERRA DEL SIGLO XVII**

RESUMEN. *Este artículo examina los escritos de Bathsua Makin (1608-1675), defensora de la educación de la mujer, intentando determinar en qué medida*

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*fueron el producto de los debates tradicionales que se publicaban sobre las mujeres y hasta qué punto constituyeron la base innovadora de las ideas de Mary Astell (1668-1731), cuyos esfuerzos en favor de las mujeres han sido considerados feministas por académicos del siglo XXI. A través de una lectura atenta del tratado de Makin, *Un ensayo para revitalizar la antigua educación de las damas* (1673), la contextualización de sus ideas con el género *querelle des femmes* y el examen tanto de los elementos de su trabajo que se superponen como de los que se distinguen de los de Astell, este artículo aboga por una reevaluación de la importancia de la contribución de Makin al debate del siglo XVII sobre la educación de la mujer.*

Palabras clave: educación de la mujer. Bathsua Makin, Mary Astell, género de *querelle des femmes*, feminismo, siglo XVII.

Over twenty years before Mary Astell (1668-1731) outlined her hopeful projections for a women's college and Judith Drake (c.1670-?) proposed her ideal curriculum of women's conversation, Bathsua Makin (c.1660-1670) wrote *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen in Religion, Manners, Arts & Tongues* (1673), in which she argues against custom and for the educability of women. Due to the strides made in twentieth-century, feminist, archival scholarship, such as Elaine Hobby's *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1646-1688* (1989) and Frances Teague's *Bathsua Makin, Woman of Learning* (1998), Makin is now known as one of the first women writers in England to define her sex as a sociological group, who, more than being connected merely by biological characteristics, share common social, economic and political needs. With these shared interests in mind, Makin's writings further argue that the social and domestic benefits of women's education would be advantageous to English society as a whole. Twenty years later, Makin's reasoning was reworked and clarified in Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), a seemingly more radical and philosophically engaged work that similarly appeals to women to abandon the distractions of society in favour of exercising their intellects and perfecting their souls. Although there is a clear resonance of phrase and perspective between the works of Makin and Astell, the latter never acknowledged any debt to the former. This neglect could be due to political differences, as Makin was a Puritan, while Astell was High Anglican and vehemently Tory. Probably most unforgivably to Astell, Makin's work is dedicated to King James II's daughter, who would become Queen Mary II, wife of William of Orange, to whom many of Astell's Jacobite friends would refuse allegiance. Despite the unacknowledged debt, the works of Makin and Astell share overlying concerns for maintaining economic class hierarchies, overthrowing gendered customs and reforming the social practices of English culture, while their rhetorical methods, immediate motives and personal allegiances, however, differ. This essay will examine the only known published treatise by Bathsua Makin in an effort to

determine to what extent her ideas were the product of traditional print debates and to what extent they were the innovative foundation for Mary Astell's ideas, which twentieth-century scholarship, such as Bridget Hill's *The First English Feminist* (1986), has deemed radically feminist in their context.

Although only twenty years separate the published efforts of Mary Astell and Bathsua Makin, their respective rhetorical strategies to essentially the same subject, the importance of educating women, differ vastly. In Astell's *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, she states clearly in her title that her intended audience is "the Ladies", and in the conversational style of an intimate friend or sister, she dedicates a significant portion of the first part of her essay to reprimanding women for neglecting the beautification of their souls in favour of the beautification of their bodies. Although the work was anonymously published, the title page declares that it was written "By a Lover of Her Sex" (Astell 1997: 3). Makin, however, courts both sexes for her audience, perhaps keeping in mind fathers of potential students for her school advertised in the essay. Makin (1998: 111) begins by addressing the non-gender specific "reader" and admits hoping that men particularly will not "cast aside this book upon sight of the title". Perhaps most disturbingly for the twenty-first century reader looking for signs of female agency, however, is Makin's adoption of a male persona for her essay. The narrator assures the reader, "I am a man myself that would not suggest a thing prejudicial to our sex" (Makin 1998: 111). And undermining any expectation the reader may have of a radical message, the masculine narrator declares, "God hath made man the head [...] and [...] your husbands have the casting voice, in whose determinations you will acquiesce" (Makin 1998: 110). The narrator's overtly authoritative and traditional stance is reiterated throughout in epigrammatic sentiments such as, "Bad women, weak to make resistance, are strong to tempt to evil" and in classical allusions afforded by an obviously classical, thereby masculine, education (Makin 1998: 113). At first, Makin's assumption of the authority of a male voice in her discussion of women may seem to place her work within a framework of paternal guidance, which is more in the masculine Renaissance tradition of essays in defence of women than anticipating the feminist interests of Mary Astell. However, the use Makin makes of the appropriated power, as will be discussed here, moves her work out of the traditional into something far more progressive, perhaps even, as some have argued, feminist.

Twentieth-century readers have been divided concerning Makin's rhetorical orthodoxy in employing a male voice. Frances Teague (2000: 149) argues that if one considers the fact that Makin was educated as a man and reared as a woman, her masculine voice and methodology are a genuine extension of her experience as a human being. Teague locates in Makin's essay instances of doubling that allow the female and male voices to alternate in taking the lead. Elaine Hobby

(1989: 202) concedes that the male persona allows the author to be “judicious, expansive, judgemental without apology or proviso”. However, she ultimately finds that whatever educational stride that may be negotiated for women by Makin “is a negotiation made in retreat [...] a retreat to quiescence, a retreat to the home and the schoolroom” (Hobby 1989: 203). Hobby sees any feminist interest expressed by Makin as being negated by her unwavering belief in class hierarchies. For this critic, Makin is bound to the social order with its class system in such a way that is incompatible with moving women forward as a group (Hobby 1989: 203). Hilda L. Smith, however, assesses this tendency to dismiss seventeenth-century feminism due to its traditional entrenchments as part of a contemporary bias. Smith (1989: 82) explains, “We are much less apt to question the breadth or depth of a writer’s feminism if she holds Marxist (or even Freudian) values that limit viewing the world wholly from a woman’s perspective, than if her constraints are due to orthodox religious or political beliefs”. For scholars of seventeenth-century women’s writing, the complications of interpreting Makin’s employment of the male voice point to a wider dissatisfaction with the designation of these works as feminist. The traditional religious and political beliefs held by seventeenth-century proponents of women’s education have been an obstacle for present-day readers, who are unable to identify with such historically specific, hierarchically invested perspectives on women. However for the purposes of this essay’s search for evidence of the orthodox and the innovative, I will draw from Nancy Weitz Miller’s examination of Makin’s use of rhetoric. Weitz Miller finds Makin’s male voice to be part of her desire for consubstantiality, an inclusion with the governing group, in order to achieve credibility and a willing audience for her unconventional assertion of women’s educability. Miller (1997: 276) asserts that as a seventeenth-century woman presuming to instruct others would appropriate divinely ordained masculine authority, women writers of the seventeenth century had to have a guiding concern for establishing a sympathetic relationship with the reader, one method for which was the capitulation into disguising her sex. In exchange for removing herself as a role model in print for young women, Makin is allowed freedom from the reductive charge that she is merely presenting the radicalized and self-interested views of a disgruntled minority. Makin obscures her authentic self for the greater cause of education, which if pursued by the public, would make such suppression unnecessary in the future.

It cannot be denied that Makin presents her ideas within an overarching presumption of a perpetually orthodox social framework. After all, Makin and Mary Astell after her envision the education of women as ultimately the way by which the morals of men, and thereby the English society, can be reformed. Makin (1998: 110) explains in her work’s dedication letter that educated women will “either

reclaim the men, or make them shamed to claim the sovereignty over such as are more wise and virtuous than themselves.” With apparent concern for the souls of all humankind, the masculine narrator explains, “I do verily think this to be the best way to dispel the clouds of ignorance and to stop the floods of debauchery that the next generation may be more wise and virtuous than any of their predecessors” (Makin 1998: 111). However, as Makin’s argument for the benefits of women’s education progresses, she asserts more emphatically, “We cannot expect otherwise to prevail against the ignorance, atheism, profaneness, superstition, idolatry, lust that reigns in the nation than by a prudent, sober, pious, virtuous education of our daughters. Their learning would stir up our sons, whom God and nature hath made superior, to a just emulation” (Makin 1998: 135). Astell, however, leaves behind Makin’s deference to men in favour of an argument for the intellectual equality of all souls regardless of gender.

Initially parallel to Makin’s argument, Astell (1997: 18) begins *A Serious Proposal* suggesting that her learned women would seek “to revive the ancient Spirit of Piety in the World and to transmit it to succeeding Generations”. Astell (1997: 41) reiterates this possibility in exactly similar language to Makin when she foresees the “reclaiming of men”. She finally develops her vision of society’s improvement by the second part of *A Serious Proposal*, when she foresees for women “the Glory of Reforming this Prophane and Profligate Age” and the “carrying [of] a large Train of Followers with us to the Court of Heaven” (Astell 1997: 150, 151). To Makin and Astell, as well as to Judith Drake, author of *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696), there is excitement in the notion of reforming mankind, because the implied authority to be gained by leading a reformation of manners and morals is tantamount to social and domestic empowerment. The natural “preeminence” of women had been argued already by male authors such as Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) and Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546), but Makin’s masculine narrator makes efforts to distance the essay from any such claim, stating “I do not (as some have wittily done) plead for female preeminence” (Makin 1998: 110). Despite this gesture against the case for female excellence, however, there is a moral superiority implicit in the idea that women can “reclaim” men from their own weak moral tendencies.

Makin’s approach to the discussion of the education of gentlewomen owes more to the assertion of female pre-eminence, part of the *querelle des femmes* literary exchange, than she is here willing to admit. The *querelle des femmes* genre is a series of works, beginning in the late middle ages and continuing throughout the Renaissance, defending and attacking women in turns with grand rhetoric and authoritative lists of excellent or villainous female figures taken from ancient and classical history and the Bible. These exchanges can be understood better as a

platform for exhibiting one's rhetorical skills than as documentation of an actual public controversy. The fabricated nature of the genre is signified by some of the surnames assumed by its authors, such as Anger, Swetnum and Sowernum. Despite the staged quality of the debate, the works were widely read, and the arguments for and against the goodness of women were often rehearsed by other authors. As explained by Ekaterina V. Haskins (1997: 288), the defences of women in the *querelle des femmes* primarily perpetuated the idealization of women as chaste, faithful and dutiful with little or no attempt at a genuine examination of their inferior status. Haskins presents Judith Drake's *Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* as the first work to appropriate the genre only to tweak its usual message, however I would argue that Bathsua Makin actually did this in 1673. By the time Makin wrote her *Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen*, this print debate on the morality or immorality of women was well established, thereby providing already familiar rhetorical devices through which Makin could make her argument and be assured of an understanding, if not sympathetic, audience. Despite her essay's explicit gesture to remove itself from the scope of the *querelle des femmes* by disregarding female pre-eminence, Makin designates her position in the debate by devoting a significant portion of her essay to the listing of female worthies, a method of argumentation used in the *querelle des femmes*. While the cataloguing of women brandishes the author's learning, this strategic positioning within the older genre also serves to further establish the authority of the male persona delivering her ideas in the essay.

The querelle des femmes initiated an argument over the insidious nature of custom that would span the English Renaissance period and then be appropriated by most late seventeenth-century female advocates. In 1592 Henry Cornelius Agrippa defended women excessively with his *De Nobilitate et Praecellentia foeminei sexus*, which was rather freely translated into English in 1542 and turned into heroic couplets with *The Glory of Women: or a Looking-Glasse for Ladies* (1652). It was then liberally translated into English again as *Female Pre-eminence: or the Dignity and Excellence of that Sex, above the Male* (1670). Each version sets forth an argument against custom. *The Glory of Women* declares that women's "liberties" are thwarted not by God's will but by "humane tyrannies", and this has resulted in their present inferiority (Agrippa 1652: 43). It is explained that:

'Tis true indeed, 'tis so, and that's the cause,
 'Tis man presuming on Jehovah's Laws:
 They are by mans precepts abolished.
 By use and custome th' are extinguished:
 For when the woman in the world is come,
 She's caus'd to live an idle life at home. (Agrippa 1652: 43-44)

This translation's discussion of custom offers a general complaint about women's subordinate position. However, the grievance expressed in the later *Female Pre-eminence* is much more specific. This work asserts:

'Tis a proud self-flattering Conceit of the *Bearded-Tribe*, to arrogate all Learning to themselves, or think the *noble* Female Sex incapable of making generous *flights* towards the top of *Parnassus* [...] Why then should they not with the same *advantages*, make at least an equal progress in *Literature*? 'Tis true, our male *Dictators* strive to *monopolize* Learning, and having by a brutish custome *barr'd* the Doors of the Muses Temple against Women, do now pretend they are *unable* and unfit to enter. (Agrippa 1980: 59-60)

Now the complaint, as it is translated here, is concerned with the specific inaccessibility of education to women excluded by "male *Dictators*", who are operating under the "proud self-flattering Conceit of the *Bearded-Tribe*". The later translation deems ignorance to be imposed on women by custom, only to be naturalized and used as evidence of their inability to learn.

Makin reworks the translation of Agrippa's argument against custom, as if it were a recognizable badge of masculine power. She begins her work with a letter to all women and especially to Lady Mary, the daughter of the Duke of York (later James II), in which the first topic to be addressed is the power of custom. Makin (1998: 109) begins with the concise but weighty declaration: "Custom, when it is inveterate, hath a mighty influence: it hath the force of nature itself". The rule of convention is immediately identified as the cause of women's deficiencies, in order to counter any prejudices the reader may bring to the essay. The argument continues, "The barbarous custom to breed women low is grown general amongst us and hath prevailed so far that it is verily believed (especially among a sort of debauched sots) that women are not endowed with such reason as men, nor capable of improvement as they are" (Makin 1998: 111). Thus, rehearsing Agrippa's argument is another manner by which Makin is able to borrow established authority in order to further bolster her masculine voice. However, she interrupts herself during her extensive catalogue of women worthies in order to distance herself from his work again. She declares, "My design is not to say all that may be said in the praise of women—how modest and chaste many have been, how remarkable in their love to their husbands, how constant in religion, how dutiful to their parents, or how beneficial to their country" (Makin 1998: 136). Indeed, although Makin is using the same rhetorical method as was often used in the *querelle des femmes* and utilizing Agrippa's argument against custom, she has adjusted these print inheritances to suit her own purposes. Makin's list of women is made up of those who, throughout history, have used their learning and been active in making good judgements. She even contemporizes the female worthies device by inserting

her friend Anna van Schurman, adding herself in the postscript and advertising the curriculum of her school “lately erected for gentlewomen” (Makin 1998: 149). These innovations serve to distinguish her work from that of Agrippa and the *querelle des femmes*, which have lists composed primarily of women who have demonstrated the idealized female qualities of great faith, humility or loyalty.

The discussion of custom surfaces again in the work of Mary Astell as a very important part of her argument that women and men have equal souls deserving the same educational cultivation. However, where Makin’s essay signals the already established argument against custom by employing linguistic continuities, Astell extensively develops the argument to suit her case. She begins *A Serious Proposal* by invoking the argument in the form of a challenge to women, “[D]are to break the enchanted Circle that custom has plac’d us in, and scorn the Vulgar way of imitating all the Impertinencies of our Neighbours” (Astell 1997: 7-8). Where Makin simply states and repeats that if a custom is bad, it should be discontinued, Astell breaks apart the argument and analyzes its pieces. Astell (1997: 93) specifies how custom is bad: “As Prejudice fetters the Understanding so does Custom manacle the Will”. She specifies for whom it is bad: “Why shou”d not we assert our Liberty, and not suffer every Trifler to impose a Yoke of Impertinent Customs on us?” (Astell 1997: 73). And most importantly, Astell (1997: 1, 33) shares her vision of how custom can be disempowered: “The only way then is to retire from the World, as the *Israelites* did out of *Egypt*”. Astell also maps out consequences for the woman who rejects custom. Astell (1997: 33) warns, “For Custom has usurpt such an unaccountable Authority, that she who would endeavour to put a stop to its Arbitrary Sway and reduce it to Reason, is in a fair way to render her self the *Butt* for all the Fops in Town to shoot their impertinent Censures at”. In view of the spectacle likely to be made of women learning, Astell sees women’s full retreat from society as the only logical solution.

It could be argued, however, that the solution offered by Makin, although less radical than same-sex seclusion, is more socially pragmatic than that offered by Astell. After all, every aspect of Makin’s methodology is calculated to avoid risk. Her solution is realistic and works rhetorically as the logical conclusion of a rational argument, all which is offered by a sensible (male) voice within an established (male) genre. In offering her solution, Makin (1998: 136) seems adamant that the traditional hierarchy, as it is known by the seventeenth century, is to remain firmly intact, when she assures her readers, “My intention is not to equalize women to men, much less to make them superior. They are the weaker sex [...]”. And twice Makin (1998: 110, 129) states that God made women to serve men. Although this upholding of social stratification is unmistakable, there is a temptation to read these statements as another part of the masculine disguise

assumed for the purposes of ensuring a positive reception to the educability of women. Makin's admission that "To ask too much is the way to be denied all" acknowledges that there is, indeed, more that could be requested (Makin 1998: 110). The statement suggests that the writer advocates submission to the gendered hierarchy not because it is implicitly right, but because it is the most practical manner by which women can negotiate a bit more liberty.

Regardless of whether or not Makin sees education as an opportunity to equalize the sexes, she definitely is not advocating the toppling of England's economic class structure. She reiterates throughout that her designs are for "persons that God hath blessed with the things of this world that have competent natural parts" (Makin 1998: 128). Similarly, Astell seems incapable of identifying with women outside of her own class. She explains, "For unless we have very strange Notions of the Divine Wisdom we must needs allow that everyone [is] placed in such a Station as they are fitted for. And if necessity of the world requires that some Person shou'd Labour for others, it likewise requires that others shou'd Think for them" (Astell 1997: 148). For Makin and Astell, humankind does not construct the social hierarchy. Rather, one's station is part of God's will on earth, part of a larger, unmistakably divine plan. The commitment of Makin and Astell to what they see as God's ordained hierarchy, however, creates problems for modern day critics, who, as discussed earlier, discount their meagre demands as a "retreat to quiescence" (Hobby 1989: 203). However, a further examination into the more subversive sentiments expressed in Makin's work may ease suspicions of their inadequacy for the twenty-first century reader.

In creating the conventional male voice for her essay, Bathsua Makin (1998: 111) has fashioned a fictional masculine character dedicated to protecting women against further attacks on their collective honour during an age so lost to depravity that it allows "women [to be] kept ignorant on purpose to be made slaves". Like the chivalrous act of battling on behalf of a woman's reputation, the masculinized narrator challenges, "Let any [men who] think themselves aggrieved [...] come forth fairly into the field against this feeble sex with solid arguments to refute what I have asserted, I think I may promise to be their champion" (Makin 1998: 111). In the spirit of a rhetorical joust, the writer arguing from inside this character's costume is free to make the occasional aggressive contention. Working within this traditional voice, one such antagonistic assertion declares, "Brutes, a few degrees higher than [man] drills or monkeys (which the Indians use to do many offices), might have better fitted some men's lust pride and pleasure" (Makin 1998: 129). The caricature of men satisfying their lusts with monkeys is barely softened by the following traditional refrain, reassuring men that women are intended as "help-meet[s]" to their husbands (Makin 1998: 129). Similar imagery is evoked again when the author refers to "this

apish kind of breeding [...] [by which] such marmosets married to buffoons, bring forth and breed up a generation of baboons, that have little more than apes and hobby-horses” (Makin 1998: 139). The earlier suggestion of men coupling with monkeys has been developed to its natural conclusion, the propagation of more monkeys resulting in the manners and customs of contemporary English society. Such arguments from a gentlewoman are combative and immodest to say the least, and would have been scandalous enough to obscure the value of her proposed solution, even to the extent of disqualifying her perceived worth as an educator of young ladies. However, in addition to allowing the author to utilize more sordid, yet effective and accessible, persuasive reasoning, the masculine disguise allows her the authority to convey her important message, “Let women be fools, and then you may easily make them slaves” (Makin 1998: 141).

There is a conformist element in the works of seventeenth-century feminists, perhaps an unforgivable quality for present-day readers who would wish to find more obvious evidence of subversion. However, as we have seen, these ideas were presented in such a manner that would be more likely to sway their contemporary audience. Regardless of seventeenth-century feminism’s conservative foundation, the overtly traditional aspects of Makin’s work need not discredit its intellectual innovations. Makin utilized the tools and framework of conventional rhetoric in order to minimize the hazards of presenting her unconventional arguments. Indeed twenty years later, Mary Astell would build upon the arguments already made by Makin and others such as Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle and Hannah Wooley, however she would not be writing under many of the same restrictions. This freedom would allow Astell to write as a woman and *about* women and to focus more extensively on the particulars of women’s oppression. Instead of characterizing Makin’s efforts on behalf of women as a “retreat to quiescence” (Hobby 1989: 203, emphasis mine), perhaps her work should be understood as a negotiation made from within the already established trenches of quiescence.

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