

BATHSUA MAKIN and MARY MORE
WITH A REPLY TO MORE BY ROBERT WHITEHALL

Educating English Daughters: Late Seventeenth-Century Debates



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Introduction

The Other Voice: Neglected Histories

This volume offers texts from two early modern women writers, Bathsua Makin (1600–81?) and Mary More (1633–1716), as well as contextual material that should help readers make sense of these “other voices” from the seventeenth century and what they had to say about women’s education. Makin argued that society as a whole would benefit if women’s education was equal to men’s. More argued that women, like men, had the right to receive an education above simple literacy, and that such an education would clearly show that the inequality of married women under English law, especially in regards to property, was only a man-made institution. Her essay drew objections from her Oxford reader, Robert Whitehall (bap. 1624–85). While both women’s texts are important in the history of English education, the women themselves are important exemplars of learned women, and during their lifetimes they both enjoyed a measure of public recognition and esteem. Yet after their deaths, the women and their texts were largely ignored until the late twentieth century. The invisibility of both women after their deaths, despite the recognition they received in their lifetimes, illustrates why they fit so well in a series about the “other voice.” History has too often been constructed in ways that effectively lose and thus silence those voices that attempt to change what a culture believes about education, about rights, and about gender.

In a sense, any voice that spoke for women’s learning exemplifies the other voice, because women were Other in early modern culture. Essays on women’s education had to speak out against the classical/medieval belief that a woman was unsuited for education because she lacked capability. That belief was intensified in the early modern period by the concern that developed in the Protestant Reformation that a woman was educated at some risk to her soul. As the general introduction to this series remarks,

Only a few women wrote anything before the dawn of the modern era, for three reasons. First, they rarely received the education that would enable them to write. Second, they were not admitted to the public roles—as administrator, bureaucrat, lawyer or notary, or university professor—in which they might gain knowledge of the kinds of things the literate public thought worth writing about. Third, the culture imposed silence on women, considering speaking out a

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form of unchastity. Given these conditions, it is remarkable that any women wrote.¹

The sixteenth century saw the advent of the printing press altering the way that education took place. Before texts were printed, few men or women had access to them unless they were in the highest ranks of society or affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. Once the printing press was introduced in the late fifteenth century, texts became more available. Humanist educators, in particular, took advantage of increased access to textbooks to teach students in grammar schools with works like William Lily's Latin grammar book, *An Introduction of the Eight Parts of Speech, and the Construction of the Same* (1542),² believing that students who learned Latin and Greek were learning discipline as well as language, good conduct as well as good syntax. Humanist scholars such as Desiderius Erasmus, John Colet, and Thomas More began to entertain the idea of educating girls, as well as boys. Even among humanist educators, however, not everyone thought women needed much education, and some still thought educating women was a waste of time.

Later in the sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, challenges came to this model of limited education for females. In England, Sir Francis Bacon suggested that the humanist model needed to be more empirical, and his work influenced many who consequently suggested reforms for education. On the Continent, the Moravian educator Johan Amos Comenius followed Bacon's ideas and introduced a number of reforms to the humanist system of education. Comenius suggested that the humanist emphasis on the classical languages needed modification because children would learn better if they were taught in the vernacular or with picture books. He suggested that teachers erred if they relied on rote memorization in their classrooms, rather than explaining the underlying systems, yet he was aware that such systems might need to be simplified.

Perhaps the most important, and radical, of his beliefs was his idea that every child, boy or girl, in every social or racial category, deserved education. His ideas underlie those of such Enlightenment educational reformers as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel. Comenius certainly influences Makin, and his ideas about the need for universal access to education help account for the essays by

1. Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr., "Introduction to the Series: The Old Voice and the Other Voice," <http://www.othervoiceineme.com/othervoice.html> (n.d., n.p.; originally published in all 60 vols. of the first [Chicago] series).

2. William Lily's grammar books in both English and Latin were published throughout the early sixteenth century (Lily died in 1522), but the 1542 edition is the one authorized by Henry VIII for use in the schools. Although this version is called Lily's *Grammar*, others contributed to it, particularly John Colet, and the 1542 edition was done by a committee. See Hedwig Gwosdek's history, *Lily's Grammar of Latin in English: An Introduction of the Eyght Partes of Speche, and the Construction of the Same* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

both Bathsua Makin and Mary More. Yet these women's essays also mark an important turn in the history of education, as examples of new ideas that would ultimately sweep away Renaissance humanism for the Enlightenment, just as Renaissance humanism had once swept away medieval scholasticism. In England, Makin and More are precursors to the eighteenth century's Mary Astell, who advocated women's education, as well as the bluestockings, women who were noted (and often scorned) for their intellectual attainments. This introduction will begin with women's education, first considering general concerns and then turning to the specifics of early modern England. Next we shall discuss the consequences of that learning for women such as Makin and More, including both the difficulties that they faced in arguing for their identities as learned women and the ways that they sought out networks of support.

Theories and Practices: Women Reading and Writing

From the classical through the medieval period, tradition held that women were intellectually and physically inferior to men. In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle had famously proclaimed that women's bodies were a sort of mutilated version of men's bodies because they lacked a penis.³ Renaissance scientists took this idea quite seriously, as Ian Maclean has demonstrated, although Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford suggest that some early modern thinkers had begun to modify this idea by the seventeenth century.⁴ Even Richard Mulcaster, who taught Elizabeth I and who strongly supported the education of women, remarked of girls: "Besides, their brains be not so much charged, neither with weight nor with multitude of matters, as boys' heads be, and therefore like empty cask[s,] they make the greater noise."⁵ When Mulcaster is defending the education of women, he is quick to note that such an education "will better weak nature,"⁶ for example, with the clear implication that a female is by nature weaker than a male. Because early modern culture continued to think of women as a lesser form of men, even a mutilated form, the education of women was typically regarded as having little importance.⁷

3. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, ed. and trans. A. L. Peck, Loeb Classical Library 366 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1943), 174–75.

4. Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), esp. chap. 3; Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550–1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19–20.

5. Richard Mulcaster, *Positions Wherein Those Primitive Circumstances Be Examined which are necessary for the training up of children* (1581), 176.

6. Mulcaster, *Positions*, 170.

7. See Edith Snook, *Women, Reading, and the Cultural Politics of Early Modern England* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2005), who argues that for present-day historians, however, the "history of reading should not be written without reference to women" (7).

This assumption of female physical inferiority was complemented by concerns about spiritual inferiority. Many in the early modern period held that all women were Eve's daughters, and hence more easily tempted to sin than were men. The schoolmaster, Thomas Salter, was particularly concerned that the education of girls be selective:

I would not have a maiden altogether forbidden, or restrained, from reading, for so much as the same is not only profitable to wise and virtuous women, but also a rich and precious jewel, but I would have her if she read, to read no other books but such as be written by godly fathers, to our instruction and soul's health, and not such lascivious songs, filthy ballads, and indecent books as be most commonly nowadays set to sale, to the great infection of youth, the names of which to recite would require a long time, and to write a great volume being more pleasant than profitable, long than learned, gallant than godly.⁸

Salter's grudging endorsement of female literacy insists that not only might unsuitable materials introduce women to dangerous knowledge, but also that womanly intellectual attainments might become a source of pride. Women, as Eve's daughters, were held to be particularly susceptible to that deadliest of sins. Some, like Sir Thomas More, held that learning actually helped women avoid pride. Defending his decision to educate his daughters, More wrote in one of his letters, "But if the soil of woman's brain be of its own nature bad, and apter to bear fern than corn (by which saying many do terrify women from learning) I am of opinion, therefore, that a woman's wit is the more diligently by good instructions and learning to be manured, to the end, the defect of nature may be redressed by industry."⁹ In humanist circles of the early sixteenth century, More was famous for educating his daughters, although his wife remained illiterate.

Another humanist educator, Juan Luis Vives, who taught Henry VIII's first child, Mary, gave much thought to education and particularly the education of girls. Vives tried to guard against the downfall of pride when he wrote that a woman might learn to improve herself or to teach her children, but she must not expect to use her education in any other way:

because a woman is a frail thing, and of weak discretion, and that may lightly be deceived: which thing our first mother Eve showeth, whom the Devil caught with a light argument. Therefore a woman should not teach, lest when she hath taken a false opinion and belief

8. Thomas Salter, *A Mirrhor mete for all Mothers, Matrones, and Maidens, intituled the Mirrhor of Modestie no lesse profitable and pleasant, then necessarie to bee read and practiced* (1579), C3r–v.

9. Foster Watson, *Vives and the Renaissance Education of Women* (London: Edward Arnold, 1912), 179.

of anything, she spread it into the hearers, [E3r] by the authority of mastership, and lightly bring other[s] into the same error, for the learners commonly do after the teacher with good will.¹⁰

Here the education of women is viewed as a possible path to authority, and Vives adamantly insists that no woman should follow it, even if she is to become queen of England. His concern to maintain St. Paul's proscription on women speaking in public or having "the authority of a man" is sufficiently common in the culture that both Makin and More address that issue in their work.

Such concerns were not simply those of male humanists. A century after Vives, Elizabeth Jocelin, who was herself a woman of considerable education, wrote a letter about her unborn baby, in the event that she died in childbirth. She told her husband that if she gave birth to a girl,

I desire her bringing up may be learning the Bible, as my sisters do, good housewifery, writing, and good works: other learning a woman needs not: though I admire it in those whom God hath blest with discretion, yet I desired not much in my own, having seen that sometimes women have greater portions of learning, than wisdom, which is of no better use to them than a mainsail to a flyboat, which runs it underwater. But where learning and wisdom meet in a virtuous disposed woman, she is the fittest closet for all goodness. She is like a well-balanced ship that may bear all her sail. She is—Indeed, I should but shame myself, if I should go about to praise her more.

But, my dear, though she have all this in her, she will hardly make a poor man's wife: Yet I leave it to thy will. If thou desirest a learned daughter, I pray God give her a wise and religious heart, that she may use it to his glory, thy comfort, and her own salvation.

But howsoever thou disposest of her education, I pray thee labor by all means to teach her true humility, though I much desire it may be as humble if it be a son as a daughter; yet in a daughter I more fear that vice; Pride being now rather accounted a virtue in our sex worthy praise, than a vice fit for reproof.¹¹

Nine days after giving birth to her daughter Theodora, Elizabeth Jocelin did indeed die. Like Vives, Jocelin fears the consequences of education, both because learning will limit her daughter's marriage prospects and because it might lead

10. Juan Luis Vives, *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, ed. Virginia Walcott Beauchamp et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 23–24.

11. Elizabeth Jocelin, *The Mothers Legacie, to her vnborne Childe* (1624), B5v to B7r.

her to be proud. Little had changed in the course of a century to temper the fear that a woman's vanity about her learning might take her soul to hell.

Aside from these arguments from biology and theology, early English culture was pragmatic. An elite man's education was grounded in the study of Latin and Greek, developing linguistic and rhetorical skills to be employed in the court, the law, or the church. Since women had no role to play in those venues, educating them in skills that they would never use was considered folly, save for a few women of high rank or those whose fathers continued a humanist tradition in their households.¹² Moreover, as the passage from Vives suggests, women had no role to play in the public sphere. Education was far from universal, so few women were included in any way, since limited educational resources were reserved for men, who were responsible for controlling property. In contrast, under the English common law of coverture, women *were* a type of property, belonging to their fathers and then their husbands. Educating women as a sex as opposed to a few exceptional individuals, then, was considered impractical.

One reason that today's readers may be surprised at the existence of Makin's and More's writings and their advocacy for an advanced education for girls in the seventeenth century is because until quite recently, scholars were under the impression that the overwhelming majority of all Englishwomen, from every social class, was illiterate. The foundational study by David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (1980), used for its evidence of literacy rates the ability to sign one's name on legal documents, mostly ecclesiastical court records; based on this definition of literacy, Cressy believed that until nearly 1700, 90 percent of English women were illiterate, although there was significant improvement in the ability to sign one's name from the 1670s onward.¹³ His general conclusion was that "women were almost universally unable to write their own names for most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."¹⁴

12. Jane Stevenson in her study of women Latin poets argues that being able to compose in Latin was "a defining ability of the educated elite from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century," and in seventeenth-century England, she finds that "the kinds of men who had their daughters taught Latin (or taught them themselves) in the 1550s did so in the 1650s and may well have done so in the 1750s." *Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender, and Authority from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20, 369–70.

13. David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 72–73, 191–201, in particular table 6.1 and graph 7.2; see also Cressy, "Literacy in Context: Meaning and Measure in Early Modern England," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 305–19. More cautiously, Roger Chartier remarked that "everywhere [in Europe] the male literacy rate is higher than the female, with a gap between the two as high as 25 or 30 percent," *Passions of the Renaissance*, vol. 3 of *A History of Private Life*, ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1987–91), 115.

14. *Literacy and Social Order*, 145.

This understanding of measuring literacy and women's abilities to write and read has been widely revised. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, social historians including Margaret Spufford and Keith Thomas offered alternative ways of measuring literacy that produced different results from Cressy's signature test, especially among the lower classes and women.¹⁵ More recent studies by scholars such as Nigel Wheale, Adam Fox, Heidi Brayman Hackel, and Margaret Ferguson have also challenged our understanding of what literacy is and examined more closely how writing and reading in this period were learned. Brayman Hackel and Fox highlight a sliding scale of literacy skills that range from the ability to read simple texts (typically taught first to children in dame or petty schools run by women and often without teaching writing), to the ability to read black-letter type such as found on broadsides and signs, to more sophisticated reading and writing involving a classical education.¹⁶

The gendered term "dame school" suggests that early modern culture associated reading with women, while writing was associated with men. According to David Hall, "town records distinguish between 'woman schools,' in which women taught reading, and 'Masters Schools' where children learned to write from male schoolmasters." He goes on to suggest that most New England autobiographies report that it was the mother who taught reading to her children; and though exceptions existed, it was the father who taught his children to write. "I lived in my Father's family 12 years," Increase Mather remembered, "I learned to read of my mother. I learned to write of Father." Furthermore, because reading was taught before writing, and because writing was considered more suitable to men, "many persons, and especially women, could read but not write."¹⁷ Hall's focus on women's literacy in Protestant New England is especially telling because it draws attention to the important connection between literacy and religion.

15. Margaret Spufford, "The First Steps in Literacy: The Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth-Century Spiritual Autobiographers," *Social History* 4 (1979): 407–35; Keith Thomas, "The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England," in *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, ed. Gerd Bauman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 97–131.

16. Nigel Wheale, *Writing and Society: Literacy, Print, and Politics in Britain, 1590–1660* (London: Routledge, 1999); Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender, and Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Margaret W. Ferguson, *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003). See also recent studies in the history of reading practices by Kevin Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); *Reading, Society, and Politics in Early Modern England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven M. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

17. David D. Hall, "The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600–1850," in *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. William L. Joyce, David D. Hall, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 24–25, 20, n. 63.