"Judicious books enlarge the mind and improve the heart": Literature in Women's Pedagogical Writings in Late Enlightenment England

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Abstract
This article argues for literature as an important component of female education in late Enlightenment England. Academic research may have neglected this aspect of the gender debate until now, yet we cannot ignore that great intellectuals such as Catharine Macaulay (1731-1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1793) and Maria Edgeworth (1769-1791) included the major products of the national and international tradition in their innovative syllabuses: they considered them the purest essence of "Truth" and "Nature", which was crucial in improving female nature. Made of epistolary correspondences and dense – at times polemical – pamphlets, this early feminist path towards equality still deserves the reader's attention. Our purpose here is to show that aside from its peculiar combination of literary criticism and pedagogy, their work lay the basis for women's independence in a just society.

Keywords: Late Enlightenment, Literature, Female Pedagogy, Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth.

1. Introduction

SIR,
I am married to a learned wife, and have the misfortune to feel, that this very circumstance is a perpetual source of vexation, and may in the end lead to my ruin. I am a merchant, […] and wish to provide for a numerous family. My wife, instead of attending to domestic concerns, is surrounded by wits and pedants; she is a poetess, and passes almost her whole time in composing, transcribing, and correcting. In the meantime her family is neglected, and left to the care of servants […]. If I bring home a few friends to dinner, the conversation never turns upon mercantile affairs, which would best suit my guests and myself, but on profound topics of literature, which we do not understand.

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Pray, dear sir, write a letter against learned women, and insert it in the Gentleman's Magazine, which my wife never fails to read, and you will confer a great favour upon your

Humble Servant,
A PLAIN DEALER
(*The Female Mentor*, I, [1793] 1802: 98-99)

It was 1793 when *The Female Mentor* first appeared[1]. A learned journal "founded on TRUTH and NATURE" (p. v), it included articles, or better "conversations", on female education, as well as on other important cultural issues. The short letter quoted above, though, is clear on the conservative positions that it expressed: the main comments on the "Plain Dealer's wife" and "the folly of her behaviour" (p. 99) were based on the principle that women should never become men's "rival[s] in the pursuits of literature" (p. 102); as for "Honoria", the Editor, she agreed that they were physically and intellectually inferior, but wondered why they "should not cultivate [their] understanding, and acquire such a proportion of taste and learning as suit[ed] [their] capacities" (p. 103). At a time when Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was generating controversy, her decision to find room for Fénelon's *Sur l'éducation des filles* (1687) (pp. 104-112) confirmed that the majority of female thinkers still found it difficult to support and share the most innovative ideas in the field.

The reason learning – particularly literature as one of its main components – continued to be seen as a thorny issue can be found in the unwritten but clear rules of patriarchal England. Women were in this period associated with motherhood and domestic life, which made "modesty" and "propriety" their most desirable qualities (Kusonoki 2015). Before the new generation of pedagogues could include novels, poems and plays in a reformed syllabus for women, they needed to demonstrate that those works could contribute to women's improvement first as wives and daughters, and then as individuals. It had been so in late Stuart times, when

[1] *The Female Mentor* was only one of the learned journals for women published in late eighteenth-century England. It was first issued in 1793 and collected "maxims" or "conversations" on several important topics. Honoria, its editor, always clarified that she was "unknown to the world" and that she "wish[ed] to continue so" (Honoria [1793] 1802: iv).

proto-feminist pamphleteers had begun their fight against custom and prejudice (D'Amore and Lardy 2012); now, after the French Revolution, the unknown Editor of *The Female Mentor* represented her contemporaries' uneasy position. They could not ignore the importance of "manners and morals" (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1793: v), yet they were determined to facilitate women's access to the world of letters, so that they could acquire a deeper knowledge and enjoy social recognition.

Despite the results they achieved, these new members of the cultural scene shared their predecessors' difficulty in promoting the formative values of fiction and poetry as tools of intellectual equality. Following the path that they traced will help us to understand that past and present, as well as literary criticism and pedagogy, were always closely interwoven. Also, most importantly, that in those years, thanks to the exchanges on these topics, England became culturally closer to France and to Europe.

2. From Makin to Drake: The Debate on Female Education in Late Stuart Times

In fact, the debate on education had always been heated. Going beyond the misogynist convictions of Renaissance England – according to which women should only read conduct and devotional books (Wayne 1996: 9-29; Charlton 2007: 41-88) – in late Stuart times Bathsua Makin (1600-1675), Judith Drake (d. 1707) and Mary Astell (1666-1731) were clear on the necessity of creating a more comprehensive syllabus for young "ladies". This meant taking an active part in the newly founded Republic of Letters, following Boileau's *Art poétique* (1674)[2], and what is more important, laying the basis for women's intellectual equality. However politically and socially conservative, Makin's *Essay to Revive the Antient Education*

[2] The main tract on the importance of literature at the end of the seventeenth century, *Art poétique* had a great impact even in the Enlightenment. In particular, Boileau's clear distinction between "good" literature and "bad" literature, especially his denunciation of the novel, heavily influenced English female pamphleteers (Duggan 2005: 122-123). Wollstonecraft, Macaulay and Edgeworth were always torn between the idea of literature as a source of pure enjoyment and as a vehicle for teaching important moral values.

of Gentlewomen (1673)[3] provides evidence that, together with "Arithmetic" and "Astronomy", "Latin, Greek and Hebrew" could be successfully proposed to young ladies (Anon.[Makin] 1673: 43-44).

It was probably too early for this generation of pamphleteers to see literature as a tool of personal enhancement and a source of pleasure, but Makin's pedagogical approach was revolutionary. Rooted in Comenius's precepts – thus on the firm belief that theoretical notions should always be connected with practice and experience – it offered "Gentlewomen" the same cultural opportunities as boys: for the first time the study of the classics was thus made available to all learners, which soon paved the way for a thorough re-discussion of women's role in the intellectual milieu (D'Amore and Lardy 2012: 120-121).

Unfortunately, Makin's work was almost forgotten in the following decades: writing between 1694 and 1696, Judith Drake and Mary Astell participated in the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* supporting contemporary authors and rediscovering the role of translators. They and the other exceptional members of the European Republic of Letters – Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678), Elizabeth Elstob (1616-1680) and Madeleine de Scudéry (1607-1701), to name but a few – had a deep knowledge of the Classics, but were strongly convinced that it was now time to increase the number of female readers, and to make even past literary forms more accessible: this would gradually change the social perception of their limitations, and create a stronger basis of exchange between the sexes.

Demonstrating that women's "Vices" originated from "Ignorance" (Astell 2002: 64)[4], and that more time and individual space would help them to develop their speculative skills, represented a real challenge especially for the philosopher Mary Astell: *A Serious*

[3] Both Bathsua Makin's and Judith Drake's tracts were actually anonymous. In late Stuart times Mary Astell was one of the few proto-feminist writers who found the courage to sign her works.

[4] They were "Inconstancy", "Incapability of acting Prudently, "Pride" and "Vanity". Aside from poor education, these "vices" had also their roots in the widespread belief that, as wives and mothers, women should only focus on their physical appearance and "trifles" (Astell 2002: 58; 64).

Proposal to the Ladies (1694) immediately distinguished itself for its utopian traits (Johns 2003: 25-48), yet it clearly widened the syllabus that Makin had designed for her young "Gentlewomen". In the First Part, as a matter of fact, "*Des Cartes* and *Malebranch*", also "*Madam D'Acier* and [the] incomparable *Orinda*" (Astell 2002: pp. 82-83), are mentioned not only to endow philosophy and literature with the same cultural recognition, but also to give female modern writing a distinct pedagogical significance. Heavily influenced by Rev. John Norris (1657-1711), Astell was very suspicious about the type of interest that "plays" and "romances" could arouse: this is why, following in her predecessors' footsteps, she particularly valued those works which could feed women's minds and souls (p. 81).

Makin's and Astell's contradictory positions towards literature – that is to say, their choice to ignore its aesthetic side – were closely connected with their conservative vision of gender roles: women were still expected to be wives and mothers, but reading could free them from their "Follies" and make them wiser. Of course, to achieve these results, all intellectual activities had to be related to the study of the Holy Texts, to meditation and prayer (p. 70): the complete opposite of the "Noise" and chaos typical of contemporary times, "Silence" represented a good starting point for late seventeenth-century "Ladies" to discover their inner world (p. 68).

It was clear that women's pedagogical debates were also rich in philosophical and sociological implications: at this time, it was important to show that the weaker sex possessed a mind and a soul (Cottingham 1996: 50-63; 107-117; Springborg 2005: 14), and that its representatives could contribute to the new cultural trends. From this point of view, Judith Drake was the first intellectual who in *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696) voiced all their difficulties as intellectuals, and proposed possible solutions to problems. Literature was one of them: she considered "the Earl of *Roscommon*, Mr. *Cowley*, Mr. *Dryden*, Mr. *Congreve* [and] Mr. [*Tom*] *Brown*" (Anon.[Drake] 1697: 79) to be at the heart of the new canon, but, for her, Shakespeare, Otway, Etheredge, Sedley and Wycherley could be helpful in engaging in "gay" or "polite" "conversation" with men.

Women's path towards change had just begun. On the eve of the Enlightenment, they were finally encouraged to go beyond the Scriptures and, despite Astell's severe criticism and warning, to enjoy even the pleasures of theatrical performances. The fight

against gender stereotypes continued in patriarchal England, but Drake's tract had already confirmed that reading and writing could be seen from a different perspective as they had the power to reform the relationship between the sexes.

3. The Age of Reason: Male Conduct Books for Women

The new century put a stronger emphasis on the importance of literature. The market of culture was now closer to the tastes and intellectual needs of the middle classes and, although private tuition was still very popular, girls' schools were well established in most English cities (Reeves 2000: 27). As a result, women's literacy rates increased – reaching 35% by 1750 (Strauss Sotiropulos 2007: 122) – which, in a period when Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) was committed to a wider diffusion of natural sciences, aroused stronger interest in novels and literary periodicals. Of course, there were also convinced supporters of the cultural significance of poetry: writing at the very beginning of the century, Lady Mary Chudleigh (1656-1710), for example, wrote that "['t]was the first way of Writing", and that it represented Nature – the guiding principle of the Enlightenment – in its various forms. The reason why it deserved to be part of women's education, though, was that it "moved the Soul" and "ingaged Affection" (Chudleigh 1710: 13).

Associating literature with emotions could not but be criticized by moralists. They continued to promote conduct and religious books for the future generations of wives and mothers, or, in order to balance serious education with decorum (Strauss Sotiropulos 2007: 126), recommended that women read biographies full of "domestick anecdotes and events" (Tavor Bennet 2017: 126). Evidence of the strong mistrust that female intellectual skills and knowledge could generate may also be found in Robert Ainsworth's *The Most Natural and Easy Way of Institution* (1698). Written on the eve of the century, it was based on clear gender and cultural oppositions: a "good Scholar" was "a *virtuous*, *modest*, and *humble* Man, and very *patient*", who "understood *Latin* and *Greek*" (Ainsworth 1736: 10); a school teacher, instead, was a woman who knew nothing "of *Hortography* [… and] Pointing", who "confounded one Period with another", and worst of all, who "read her Prayers" in class (p. 10).

A Latin lexicographer who advocated the teaching of Classical languages and was in favour of home education, Ainsworth (1660-1743) never discussed the importance of literary studies, which may explain why even anonymous tracts such as *The Accomplish'd Housewife; Or, the Gentlewoman's Companion* (1746) urged that books for the female sex should be made only for "a laudable Purpose and, if possible, be embellish'd with Scripture" (Anon. 1746: 6).

Male authors remained convinced that literature was only a source of "recreations and amusement" (Ash 1777: 178), and that, for this reason, it should not be included in women's recommended studies. Edited by Charles Allen (1728 ca.-1792) in 1760, *The Polite Lady; or a Course of Female Education* was proposed as a tribute to the new epistolary mode while reinforcing the most conservative pedagogical trends. Its two fictitious characters – Portia and her daughter Sophy – exchanged their views on every aspect of female upbringing and education; however, in Letter XXVIII Portia wrote to young Sophy about "another large field of reading" in which she could find "great pleasure and delight": "novels, plays, and every kind of poetry" (Allen 1769: 139). Unlike her predecessors, Portia did not provide a complete list of recommended authors or works: she believed that "universal history", "ancient and modern" (pp. 138-139), had a great formative value, but that literature would "teach [her daughter] to read with greater justness and propriety" (p. 140).

However marginal in the highest tradition of English pedagogy, Allen's tract represented the product of the debate of those years on "polite education" (Bygrave 2009: 95-98). Theorized by the Earls of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) and Chesterfield (1694-1773), the concept of "polite education" was inspired by the classics and contributed to the creation of clear social, religious and gender identities. Women were mainly seen – as the fictitious character of Portia shows – as mothers who could foster intellectual growth in their children (Davies 2016: 10), so it was essential that they adhered to precise moral models both in the private and the public spheres.

Aside from moralistic and pedagogical writings, in the following years the learned press played a key role in the educational field (Van Horn Melton 2001: 1; Italia 2001: 1-23; Batchelor and Powell eds. 2018). Charles Allen in *The Polite Lady* had already confirmed that "The Spectators, Guardians, and Tatlers" were shaping literary

tastes while giving young women "a notion of the foibles and fashions of the last age" (Allen 1769: 139); at the end of the century Reverend John Bennett (1714-1759) even added that "in their respective times" those publications had greatly contributed to their "knowledge and improvement" (Bennett 1793: 26). His *Strictures on Female Education* – which appeared posthumously in 1787 – represented an effort to follow the new trends of thought, but its bases were highly conventional. On the one hand, for instance, it praised "Fenelon" as a "religious guardian of women" and the "writings of Madame la Comtesse de Genlis" as "a treasure" (p. 27); on the other hand, it proposed Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806) and Anna Seward (1742-1809) as the emblems of "an unnatural and invidious eminence" (pp. 27-28).

Based on the founding principles of patriarchalism, *Strictures on Female Education* did not have a significant impact on the social debate of its time. It denounced – but never even tried to solve – the problem of women's low literacy rates, whereas female pedagogical writings confirmed that it was possible not only to change direction, but especially to oppose the conduct book market's tendency to utilize science and religion against the weaker sex (Strauss Sotiropulos 2007: 128). Once again, rediscovering the formative value of literary studies would be crucial in reforming the educational system and promoting intellectual equality.

4. Women Thinkers at the End of the Century: Confronting the Past and the Present

Learned women continued their predecessors' pedagogical discourse in the closing decades of the century. They could not identify themselves with Makin, Astell, or even Drake: fervent Anglicans and politically tied both to the Stuart dynasty and the Tory party, these seventeenth-century intellectuals had never really wanted to change gender roles, which represented a failure for the early feminist movement. It was now time to give England more than an increased number of learned wives and mothers: the winds of revolution would help to obtain more positive results.

Forgetful of their past and completely immersed in the spirit of the Enlightenment, the new generation of women pamphleteers was eager to comment on the greatest contributions to the educational

debate both in France and at home. Catharine Macaulay (1731-1791) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), for instance, were utterly against Rousseau's "natural man" and the link that he had established between gender difference and physical capacities (Frazer 2013: 150-155). As for the Anglo-Irish author Maria Edgeworth (1769-1859), she deeply admired Madame De Genlis (1746-1830), and appreciated not only her idea of reading as *an acte éducatif*, but also the 150 literary works that she had included in her *bibliothèque idéale* (Deshaye 2014: 190). Dow and Ó Gallchoir confirm that Edgeworth paid regular visits to her in the Arsenal, and that *Adelaide et Théodore* (1782) greatly influenced the elaboration of her theories (Dow 2016: ix-x; Ó Gallchoir, 2018:24-25).

Yet, as has been said, there was not only the French debate to consider. The English cultural scene was equally vibrant and potentially dangerous. Aside from the popular publications in the conduct book market, there was the highest philosophical tradition: the father of empiricism, John Locke, still represented a source of inspiration for nearly every important writer on education (Richardson 2002: 24); at the same time Edmund Burke, with his chauvinist defence of the hierarchical family and condemnation of revolution as "the embodiment of political violence, irrationality [...] and sex licentiousness" (Kent 2002: 127), was seriously threatening the women's liberation project (Havens 2016: 22-26).

A profound revision of the main components of learning was urgently needed: if the majority of the Bluestockings had generally engaged in literary criticism and the natural sciences to legitimate female intellectual ability (Strauss Sotiropoulos 2007: 126; Eger 2010: 8-31), the new generation of proto-feminist thinkers emphasized the pedagogical importance of the humanities and of literature, which represented a complete change of direction. Their effort would offer their contemporaries the chance to become more active in the public sphere, thus also contributing to a more inclusive idea of nation and empire (Davies 2005: 75).

4.a. "(Pre-)Revolutionary" Wollstonecraft: The Path towards Independence

The first female writer who expressed her views on women's cultural growth was Mary Wollstonecraft in *Thoughts on the*

Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life (1787). Published thanks to Joseph Johnson's support, this tract – which represented the very beginning of her career – would be continued, even expanded, in her future works: *The Female Reader* (1789), the seminal *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* (1792) and the unfinished *Letter on the Management of Infants*. Richardson is clear that throughout her life she also systematically commented on children's books and educational publications because, for her, reforming pedagogy was an indispensable step towards female emancipation and freedom (Richardson 2002: 24).

However innovative, though, *Thoughts on Education* was the product of the intellectual debate that Richard Price (1723-1791) and Joseph Johnson (1738-1809) had generated (Modugno 2002: 36). These two, together with other enlightened thinkers and pamphleteers, had already written extensively on the causes of women's condition of inferiority, but Wollstonecraft believed that "much still remained to be said" (Wollstonecraft 1787: iii), and was determined to offer her personal contribution.

In point of fact, showing the pedagogical significance of the humanities represented the beginning of a new process. For the first time, the fine arts were praised for their "most rational and delicate pleasure[s]" also for their "power of expression" (p. 42): the reason learners should appreciate them was that in this way they would develop a better taste for the beauties of Nature and decipher its hidden meanings.

If beauty and pleasure were finally considered positive elements in the educational discourse, social and individual improvement was still crucial. Closely connected to reading and writing, in fact, literature and "judicious books" (p. 49) were recommended not only because they could contribute to a more equal relation between the sexes, but especially because they were now said to make women more sensible and independent. Authors were thus urged to provide a true description both of "the human passions" and of life (p. 50), and, as regards form, to keep away from "pompous diction" (p. 46). Wollstonecraft did not provide a list of recommended writers and works in this phase, yet she utterly condemned those critics who admired great masters such as "Shakespeare, Milton and Pope" only for their technical mastery (p. 52). In her opinion, the message that

they conveyed was far more important, so it was necessary – even for young women – to "enter into their spirit" and gain a deeper understanding of their works (pp. 52-53).

The idea that literature had the power to improve female nature and endow it with the same rational qualities as men could also be found in the closing sections of *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. Here the focus was the theatre and its main genres, the tragedy and the comedy. Again, it was possible to read about Shakespeare and his sense of Nature; "dramatic performances", which helped [learners] to discriminate characters" (p. 149) and improve their sense of judgement, were overtly promoted.

Although this was her final "thought" on literature at the time, Wollstonecraft continued to work on an alternative educational model. In 1788, for instance, she published *Mary: A Fiction* and *Original Stories*; at the outbreak of the French Revolution, though, *The Female Reader*[5] provided a carefully ordered anthology-textbook where she collected excerpts not only from the Bible, Shakespeare and Milton, but also from the "best" contemporary writers. There was of course room for the most renowned poets, novelists and playwrights[6], but Sarah Chapone (née Kirkham, 1699-1764), Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) and Lucy Aikin (1781-1864) were given a prominent role as they represented the finest female tradition[7]. Evidence that she shared Mrs. Chapone's belief that it was now time to utilize the *Belles Lettres* to "cultivate" female "talents" (Wollstonecraft, 1789: 9-10) can be found in the opening section entitled "Select Desultory Thoughts: Addressed to Females" (pp. 1-16). It was rich in references to the Christian faith and morality, yet it clearly showed that this new work was firmly rooted in the culture of the Enlightenment: Wollstonecraft, in fact, had already admitted that she had arranged her "pieces" according to the "simple order

[5] Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Female Reader* was first discovered by the American scholar Moira Ferguson in 1978. She edited it in 1980; "A Facsimile of the Original from Gale, Cengage Learning and The British Library" has only recently appeared.

[6] Following their order of appearance in Books I-VI, they were "Gregory", "Cowper", "L. Chesterfield", "Johnson" "Goldsmith", "Young", "Steel", "Sterne", "Swift" and "Richardson".

[7] The above-mentioned M.me De Genlis was a strong reference point, but Wollstonecraft also quoted from Sarah Pennington (1720-1783), Catherine Talbot (1721-1770), Sarah Trimmer (1741-1810) and Charlotte Smith (1749-1806).

of Nature" (Wollstonecraft 1789: vi), and that she believed that "many poems, tales, and allegories, [had been] […] calculated to affect a young heart" (p. iii); however, it was especially through the most "natural and touching descriptions" (p. iv) that she intended to develop her readers' literary taste and critical thinking. For her, combining the founding principle of her time with positive feelings would help to follow the right textual paths, thus acquiring "deep, solid, or valuable knowledge" (p. 120).

Neglected by modern and contemporary critics for its moderate vision of female condition (Ferguson 1978: 948; Jones 2002: 132), *The Female Reader* represented a key step in the construction of Wollstonecraft's educational model. A few years later, in fact – when she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* – she was ready not only to abandon religion as a tribute to tradition, but also, most importantly, to reinforce the idea that literature was instrumental in achieving personal independence and social awareness (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1793: ii).

A dense, polemical tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* represented the strongest possible attack against patriarchalism. It focused on topics such as "the prevailing opinion of a sexual character", "morality", also female "degradation". It was however in the section entitled "Some Instances of the Folly Which the Ignorance of Women Generates" that literature was associated with a realistic portrayal of the world and amusement (p. 80). The former in particular was proposed as a key value for all "useful members of society" who "love[d] mankind" (p. 247), women included (p. 253). The London cultural scene immediately reacted to such strong radicalism (Fuehrer Taylor 2007: 1-10), and Wollstonecraft – who had only expressed moderate views on women and literature until that moment – came to be seen as "the hyena in petticoats" (p. 1).

4.b. The Late 1790s: Macaulay's Reformed Canon and Syllabus

Hence, on the eve of the nineteenth century literature was at the heart of the pedagogical debate and generated controversy. Women writers still found it difficult to promote it only for its charm and beauty: in late Stuart times Drake had encouraged her contemporaries to take delight in drama and utilize their knowledge to establish a deeper relationship with men; after almost eighty

years, Wollstonecraft exalted literature as it satisfied the need for reform typical of the Enlightenment as well as pure enjoyment. She had done so at the beginning of her career – that is to say at the time of *Thoughts on Female Education* – and she was determined to continue. Furthermore, she could not ignore the fact that Catharine Macaulay, the author of the famous *History of England* (1763-1783) – and one of the most outstanding figures of the Bluestocking circle – had been clear especially on the pedagogical value of the main literary genres. Her *Letters on Education. With Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Matters* (1790) had clarified that they were indispensable to make the English school system more just and equal (Titone 2004: 87; Davies 2005: 75, 120-121): at the end of the century education was still based on gender and socioeconomic class (Titone 2004: 89), which showed why she wanted to contribute to change in this field.

Divided into two parts, however, Macaulay's tract had its roots in the letter entitled "No characteristic Difference in Sex" (Gardner 1998: 119). It was rich in references to the main intellectuals of the time – Addison and "gallant Chesterfield", to name but two (Macaulay 1790: 131) – and it criticized Pope for his patronizing assumption that "*a perfect woman is but a softer man*" (p. 128). Of course, Rousseau was *the* enemy to fight: Macaulay's pragmatic approach to sexism would certainly help to discard his chauvinist convictions.

In fact, even though she used all her knowledge to counterattack the most popular pedagogue on the international scene, Macaulay was fully committed to syllabus design. There is no trace of her proposals in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, yet her *Letters on Education* put an equally strong emphasis on gender issues and on the value of the humanities. In order to "enlarge" pupils' "ideas", in fact, it urged parents and tutors to introduce them, first, to "the most celebrated fables in the English, Latin and French languages" (p. 80-81); then, to "a proper selection of Plutarch's Lives in English translation, Addison's Spectators and Guthrie's Geographical Grammar" (p. 81).

Devoted to the "Literary Education of young Persons", Letters XIV and XV, though, also included advice for adolescents and advanced learners: "Dr. Samuel Johnson's practical precepts" would help them "to compose with celerity" (p. 81); as for the *Belles Lettres*, they represented "a relief from the drier study of morals

and history", which should encourage the younger generations to appreciate Shakespeare and Milton, as well as "Addison's *Cato*" and "Steele's *Conscious Lovers*" (p. 82).

Of course, providing a select list of authors and works did not suffice to explain why literature could improve the English education system and society at large. In Letter XV, for instance, "Cervantes, le Sage, and Fielding" were overtly praised for the "delight" that they gave to the "judicious reader" (p. 90), but close reading was considered even more important as it helped learners to "comprehend" complex texts such as the Scriptures (p. 86). Macaulay, in fact, was firmly convinced that "the sacred writings put in the hands of youth before they have acquired judgement, or a sufficient literary knowledge […] must naturally give rise to doubts" (p. 90).

Combining literary criticism with pedagogy – it was in the final passages of this letter, for instance, that she clarified why Richardson and Burney could not be considered as positive models for the new generations[8] – Macaulay overtly stated that the *Belles Lettres* had "the power of pleasing and improving" and that they could strongly "influence the manners of society" (p. 93). Writing on women's liberation a couple of years later, Wollstonecraft, as we have seen, could not but agree with her. Wollstonecraft may not have shared Macaulay's pragmatic vision of education – this is why she never even wanted to implement her syllabus for both sexes – yet she praised her contribution to women's fight for intellectual equality in her enthusiastic review of *Letters on Education* and incorporated her message in *A Vindication*.

4.c. A Bridge to Romanticism: Edgeworth's "Literary" Advice for Educators

Recent research has shown that it was not always easy for all the members of that generation of early feminist writers to follow

[8] Edgeworth declared Richardson "the most moral novel writer of the whole class", but believed that "his history of Pamela, which exhibits a pattern of chastity in low life, is conducted in such a manner as to render it totally unfit for the perusal of youth" (p. 91). As regards "the Cecilia of Miss Burney", she criticized the "conduct of the heroine", particularly her strong emphasis on "the power of love" (p. 92).

Wollstonecraft's revolutionary model (Weiss 2017: 172). Maria Edgeworth in particular never accepted her sharp tones, nor her Jacobite ideas: appearing a few years after *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, both her *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) and *Practical Education* (1798) stemmed from her conviction that women should achieve their goals as a result of a long cultural and social process. She too, however, believed in a possible reform of the English educational system, and considered literature and philosophy as key components in the shaping of a new female character.

She had been interested in these topics since the early years of her career. In *Letters to Julia and Caroline*, for instance – which she wrote early in 1787 and later included in *Letters to Literary Ladies* – she expressed strong criticism of Rousseau and Burke, and debated the "advantages of cultivating the female understanding" (Edgeworth [1795] 1799: v). Evidence that the "refinements of literary and romantic pursuits" (pp. 142-143) were central in the two protagonists' exchanges could also be found in Caroline's description of Julia. Her love for poetry was "so intimately interwoven in her mind" that if marriage had taken it away from her, her "whole fabric" would have been "destroyed" (p. 143); as for novels, they also appealed to Caroline, as long as they adhered to the principle of truth and provided a realistic vision of life.

Grathwol has recently confirmed that Edgeworth was torn between the idea of literature as a source of pure pleasure and the importance of ethics. These were the years when she was heavily influenced by her father Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817) and his ultra conservative friend Thomas Day (1748-1789): it took her quite a long time to find a compromise between the moderate context in which she had been raised and her innovative pedagogy. However, as a mature writer she finally managed to promote her idea of women as "thoughtful, active citizens and sensible mothers" (Grathwol 2018: 75).

Edgeworth's choice never to echo Wollstonecraft's violent tones and to find a compromise between tradition and innovation may explain why her writings were perceived as contradictory. Part I of *Letters to Literary Ladies*, for instance, only mildly denounces the limitations that "Custom" had imposed on women; Part II, on the contrary, insists on a new concept of female agency. It was related to the ambition to form "a society of literary and estimable friends",

which showed that women had enough "judgement to discern merit" to actively contribute to the cultural scene (Edgeworth [1795] 1799: 163). The next step would be to link literature to pedagogy. According to Narain, both *Practical Education* and *Moral Tales* (1832) are the product of her determination to establish a closer link between these two fields, in order to change her contemporaries' condition in the private and public spheres (Narain 2018: 58).

Divided into two volumes, *Practical Education* was more popular than *Letters to Literary Ladies*. Despite the fact that she had written it with her father, Edgeworth closely referred to Madame De Genlis and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, which helped her to renew her image as a "progressive educator" and a "strong supporter of female agency" (p. 58): aside from her moderate tones, it was clear that she was taking an active part in the feminist debate of her time.

Once again, she wanted to continue her reflection on literature as a pedagogical tool. It was embedded in her long section on "Books", which concluded Volume I, and insisted on the importance of private tuition (Edgeworth [1798] 1815: 416): echoing Wollstonecraft on this particular issue, Edgeworth confirmed that it was in such a limited but stimulating context that the younger generations could develop "their taste for literature" and their vision of life. Books, for her, in fact, "ought to be *sifted* by an academy of enlightened parents" (p. 416), and "copy nature" (p. 427). For this reason, she criticized those texts which only aroused the young readers' curiosity and imagination – *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, also the story of Sinbad the Sailor – and advised parents that they should propose "the history of realities written in an entertaining manner" (p. 434). Although these latter were not only "better suited to the purposes of education, but also more agreeable than improbable fictions" (p. 434), it was also important to let young readers choose their own readings and give them the chance to express their personal literary taste.

Ethics thus seemed to combine with a strong respect for intellectual liberties and gender equality. The concluding passages of this chapter were all dedicated to Shakespeare's historical plays, as well as the pleasures of poetry and drama. After recalling Macaulay and her idea of good literature "copying" Nature, Edgeworth mentioned "Milton, Thomson, Goldsmith and Gray" (p. 479), and warned both mature and young readers that their masterpieces

should not be learned by rote, but understood and appreciated in full.

Her vision of literature as a mirror of life and a tool of personal improvement for the future generations would be ideally expanded in her father's *Poetry Explained for the Use of Young People* (1802). Here clarity and intelligibility were still considered central: in the age of "the sublime, or beautiful" (Lovell Edgeworth, 1802: vi), "the right [still had to] yield to the expedient" (p. viii), and "contents" were still expected to be "useful" (p. x).

5. Concluding Remarks

Edgeworth continued her discourse on education in the following years. It was 1832 when she published her first volume of *Tales and Novels*, and claimed that "under proper management, amusement and instruction may accompany each other through many paths of literature" (Edgeworth [1832] 1834: iv). An ideal bridge between the eighteenth-century spirit of reformism and the new debates of the late Romantic period, her mature work provides evidence that it was always difficult for female pedagogues to value the art of writing only for its pleasures.

From this point of view, past and present seemed to be the same. In Restoration times, as we have seen, Astell and Drake had encouraged their contemporaries to study poetry and drama to become better wives and mothers, also to improve their "conversation" with men; in the following decades Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, and Edgeworth promoted "judicious books" first as tools of individual growth, and then of independence and social commitment. Torn between the idea of literature as a source of pure enjoyment and ethics, these women blended tradition with innovation, thus showing that literary studies, pedagogy and gender could be profitably interwoven. The path that they shaped in response to the attacks of patriarchalism and of the highest male philosophical tradition provides evidence of their determination to continue to operate *within* the cultural debate of their time.

Far from finished, the research on this neglected but fascinating topic should be continued. In the future, for instance, it would be important to provide a clearer diachronic picture of this process, focusing on the earlier moments of the Enlightenment, and

including a much wider range of textual sources. At a time when ideas were also circulated through popular anonymous writings and periodicals, going beyond major female voices would certainly contribute to a deeper understanding of both this particular aspect of English proto-feminism and reformism. The impact that – despite their contradictions – women's intellectual choices had on their contemporaries was decisive in laying the basis for a more equal and inclusive society.

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