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The Odds and the Ends: What to Do With Some Letters of Catharine Macaulay

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The prevailing attitude that she must be a bit queer in all ways, otherwise she would not be interested in “men’s” subjects, was indicated by Boswell’s surprise that she gave him “a good breakfast, like any other woman.”¹

Jane Austen’s letters are not “just as real”—they are real, and as we read them we too can watch the daily business of herself, her family, and friends passing before our eyes, and, if we wish, think away two hundred years to participate unseen in their joys and sorrows.²

Biographers of Catharine Macaulay (1731–91), much like her contemporaries, often agreed that the woman’s reputation was shaped by the peculiar company she kept: prominent, intellectual, political, radical, revolutionary, and occasionally “foolish.”³ This essay examines why it matters what company a writer keeps, especially when that writer is a woman and her reputation is tied to the status of her letters and her correspondents.

In scholarship on eighteenth-century writing, the letter has been crucially tied to the figure of “a woman writing a letter,” an embodiment of the imagined privacy of the letter, of women’s “experience” of seclusion and domesticity, and the turn inward characteristic of modernity.⁴ Letters were a means of political intervention for those who aspired to have their opinions known and distributed, and among those who did not, especially if the opinions were inadequately represented or potentially seditious. In this context, recovery of women’s correspondence has been a crucial way of showing that eighteenth-century women kept good company (of other women, other women writers, reputable male writers), and that their “private” writing testified to intellectual worth along with a measure of propriety.⁵ A woman writing a letter in that context could become “a myth of origin in her own right” which “accounts for the emergence of modern subjects and modern social structures; of gender rela-

tions, and perhaps even of the concept of gender itself; of literary, cultural and feminist theory."⁶

Macaulay's letters have been studied in the context of genealogies of prominent women's writing, and cited as evidence of her influence on prominent figures in the history of feminism.⁷ Kate Davies has treated the correspondence between Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren, a prominent "patriot" figure in the American Revolution, as extraordinary evidence of the women's explicit and complex political activity. Assuming an organic relationship between femininity and the letter, Davies suggests that "a language of feeling and the space of the letter might afford an important forum for transatlantic debate on women's literary and political identities."⁸ The women's letters help to re-appropriate the traditionally feminine discourses such as "'natural' affections, feminine privacy, religion, learning, profession, sensibility, and sociability," offering evidence of women's experiences otherwise unrepresented.⁹

I turn to letters between Catharine Macaulay and three of her friends—Mary Knowles, John Collett Ryland, and Lord Buchan—to suggest that the letters' significance goes beyond the concerns of women, women's writing, and "women's experience." Macaulay has always been difficult, for her contemporaries as for the modern readers, to sequester into the sphere of privacy, unambiguous femininity, political reticence, and inaction often said to have marked eighteenth-century women's lives and activities.¹⁰ Conspicuous and celebrated for her work in her own day, between 1763 and 1783 she published eight volumes of *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line* that made her the famous "female historian." In 1779, she was Clio, the muse of history, among "The nine living muses of Great Britain" of Richard Samuel's painting, shoulder to shoulder with famous Bluestockings and women in the arts. Her interest in historiography was only one expression of her interest in writing and national politics, at a time when the subject seemed to compromise the propriety of women who addressed it.¹¹ Macaulay wrote treatises and pamphlets about copyright law, entered philosophical and theological debates, and voiced support for American and French Revolutions as unprecedented instances of political change, and change for the better. Toward the end of her life, she wrote in explicit support of formal education for women.¹²

Making a professional foray outside the perceived limitations of her gender and endorsing radical political positions made Macaulay vulnerable to attack and disdain. An unconventional personal decision (to marry a man younger and poorer than she was) served as an opportunity to punish her for the political inconvenience of her work. Her Whig allies could distance themselves from her interpretation of the Glorious Revolution as a political failure, and condone the personal invective in periodicals resulting in social isolation for the woman whose understanding of "liberty" was said to be clear at last. Mary Hays, writing a kind of oral history in the years following Macaulay's death, reported that

the historian had rankled feelings of propriety by failing to heed the belief that all abilities, especially intellectual ones, had to be gendered, such that

a female historian, by its singularity, could not fail to excite attention: she seemed to have stepped out of the province of her sex; curiosity was sharpened, and malevolence provoked. The author was attacked by petty and personal scurrilities, to which it was believed her sex would render her vulnerable. Her talents and powers could not be denied; her beauty was therefore called into question, as if it was at all concerned with the subject.¹³

Macaulay could become a convenient subject of recovery for early academic feminists, although critical literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries often remains at arm's length from the woman.¹⁴ Knowing more about Macaulay has often required a degree of embarrassment on account of her desultory attitude towards her own legacy: that she never thought to publish a novel, that she received inappropriate attention from men, that she married unconventionally, that she alienated reputable friends and preferred the weird and inappropriate ones.¹⁵ The conundrum of Macaulay's status as a model woman was captured well by a mid-twentieth-century biographer, Mildred Chaffee Beckwith (her own work never published), who assessed that "the most strongly criticized event of Macaulay's entire career was her marriage to William Graham at Leicester, November 14, 1778."¹⁶ The one published biography of Catharine Macaulay, Bridget Hill's *Republican Virago*, takes for its title the moniker coined for the "female historian" by Edmund Burke, along with a measure of ambivalence about the record she left behind. More recent scholarship has treated Macaulay as a writer, and not primarily as a female figure, and placed her texts within the discourses of political philosophy,¹⁷ historiography,¹⁸ and education.¹⁹

THE ODDS: CLUSTERS, CONVENTIONS, AND PROTOCOLS

It has long been clear that, "on the whole, Mrs. Macaulay did not discuss her personal affairs with her correspondents, who were mostly of the male sex, and this may account for what her critics regard as maternal indifference."²⁰ The scarce evidence of Macaulay's interest in conventional womanhood, compounded by the historian's elite social connections and her gender-inappropriate intellectual, political, and sexual interests, has done little to make of Macaulay a representative figure of "female experience." In the absence of conventionally "feminine" interests and canonical status, critical engagement with Macaulay's correspondence can be an interesting methodological experiment addressing questions about the source of authority of eighteenth-century letters.

What remains of Macaulay's personal correspondence has been compiled over decades, from scattered acquisitions by buyers increasingly confident

about Macaulay's significance by proxy to prominent historical figures. The largest batch of Macaulay's correspondence, anchored to an institutional collection in the United States, attributes letters to "Lady Catharine," a mis-gentrification signaling desire for a British woman writer to become a worthy correspondent for some of the most prominent early American patriots (John Adams, George Washington, Ezra Stiles, Mercy Otis Warren, etc.).²¹ Macaulay's interest in the letter as a genre that references personal connections as an index of political power was a subject of curiosity in her own time, and her letters to friends were treated as material potentially threatening to her reputation. Her *History of England from the Revolution to the Present Time In a Series of Letters to the Reverend Dr. Wilson* (1778) consists of a series of letters to a known friend and political ally.²² The epistolary history was a serious project: a sustained rumination on the challenges of writing historiography that remained loyal to the archival material she consulted, tolerably readable, and politically effective. In the volume, the addressee was as a stand-in for all the "friends of liberty" whose disposition to the good cause she could safely assume, even if she had never met them. Critics at the time of publication were curious about how the tangle of social and political connections affected Macaulay's credibility, especially if she could address historical letters to her "Platonic lover."²³ When Macaulay's intent to marry became clear, Wilson threatened to publish their private correspondence and make a scandal of her involvement with her new husband's family.

For Macaulay and her correspondents, men and women, letters could be crucial instruments of information in the volatile atmosphere of domestic and colonial unrest. Their social positions and political connections made their letter writing very different from the precarious work of "corresponding societies." Strongly idealistic and dissident, the letter writers belonged to a circuit whose individual circumstances and personal connections guaranteed confidence and reliability. After she left London and Bath and the vibrant social life she enjoyed there, Macaulay learned primarily from her correspondence about the scale of events of her day, as when letters repeatedly mentioned the significance of the "Revolution Controversy" initiated by Richard Price's public delivery of "A Discourse on the Love of our Country" ("Address which he called it and not a Sermon"), a pamphlet praising the French Revolution in London, on the anniversary of the Glorious Revolution, in November 1789.²⁴ Letters carried news about the importance of changing political rhetoric, as much as they did about events in London, Paris, and Philadelphia. Friends' letters and "hints" spared Macaulay from "profound ignorance of the glorious things which have been said and done at your last revolution meetings for tho I have the perusal of four different papers I have not met with one word of what was transacted on that occasion."²⁵

This correspondence suggests not just that "the varied and often unpredictable circulation of letters confounds simple distinctions between public and

private,"²⁶ but also that, as documents designed for circulation, letters often confound the distinction between a performance and a representation of subjectivity, and frustrate the readers' "fantasy of revelation."²⁷

Macaulay and her correspondents write explicitly about the rules of politeness as an expression of shared political and personal investment in the relationship established by the letter, and about the limits of writing as political work. They discuss the grounds of intellectual and moral authority, often in forms of writing that "fell short of ease or expressiveness," as if little concerned about the ways in which standardized or polite language, spelling, and syntax, or brevity and choice of topic could signal propriety and epistolary civility.²⁸ The writers seem obscure precisely because of their deviations from the aesthetic of polite letters: these are texts and friends that are potentially embarrassing and foolish. But they are also enabling, in that they treat the protocols of correspondence as a process of personal, social, and political regulation: these are transgressions of gender norms as often as failures of standardized composition.²⁹ It seems less rewarding to read their letters as evidence of experience, than to ask about how letters become standards for the documentation of experience, and how they signal relevance and develop forms of correspondence where one could otherwise see idiosyncrasy, monologic excess, or ideological and political extremism. These questions are especially important if they can help us understand how certain protocols of writing about experience get relegated to a gender, and how gendered genres of experience create subjects of literary, cultural, or social history.

The obscurity of Macaulay's correspondents is an enabling condition for such a reading because it allows an examination of the motives for the interpretation of their letters and of the protocols that distinguish between literary and other kinds of texts. As documentation for the history of writing not representative or expressive of a gender identity, these letters give license to re-examine the cohesion of "women's writing" as a field of political intervention understood to coalesce around the writers' gender, and charged with the task of elevating women's gender and writing performance from the context of privacy, deprivation, and absence. Rather than evidence of "women's experience," the letters are more interesting instead as a record of the traffic in letters between Macaulay and her (now obscure) contemporaries, men and women, for whom gender did not dictate the form, range of reference, or political significance of their exchange. Their correspondence can document instead a relationship of writers to writing and to its limitations as an instrument of invention and representation.

LETTERS THAT RAN AWAY

Macaulay's correspondence with Mary Knowles (née Morris), the little-known "ingenious Quaker," can be read as a reminder about the range of forms wom-

en's activity and obscurity could take. Knowles and Macaulay once moved in the same social circles, connected to political parties and interest groups, but have only recently been remembered together in historical narratives about extreme political positions.³⁰ Knowles met Macaulay either in Bath (where they shared some friends and political contacts) or at the house of brothers Edward and Charles Dilly, the printers of radical literature and frequent dinner hosts to the writers whose work they published. The "celebrated" Mrs. Knowles, a provincial woman of the middling classes, was best known for getting at least £800 from the King (likely at the Queen's behest) for the King's portrait in needlepoint.³¹ (The money made it possible for her husband to get a medical degree and build a professional career.) She was authorized to have political opinions by the tradition particular to her religious habitus; it was an entitlement that qualified her to correspond with the also-"celebrated" Mrs. Macaulay.³² Raised by a father who believed in and wrote about the "Female's Right to Literature," she married (only at the age of thirty-four) a man she chose and respected, although he was never seen as an equal to "the beauty of Staffordshire."³³ Like Macaulay, Knowles published works on politics and theology, and was known to excel at writing letters, some of which became "social texts," written to be read by persons other than the single alleged addressee.³⁴

Encouraged by Quaker doctrine to believe that a friend could take almost any shape and either gender, and that women's abilities were equal to men's, Knowles was happy to acknowledge that "My Cath'rine sees far."³⁵ She wrote to "gentle Catharine" in 1774, "warmed with gladness" about Macaulay's recovery, to discuss her "presage" that no degree of pleading with the government was going to change the inauspicious course of events in the American colonies—that the government was in effect wrongheaded in its understanding of the situation, and too "Machiavilian" to consider the dire possibilities that commentators were anticipating in public and private conversations. The two women wrote about politics explicitly and unapologetically. Knowles's explanation of the political situation in the letters involves a discussion of the ways in which "the pacific principle" of Quaker theology helps her to understand the obstacles to the resolution of the colonial dispute. Before expressing her hope that her family might enjoy Macaulay's company soon, Knowles almost laments that, "I did not intend to have gone such a length in politics, but the subject runs away with me."³⁶

Because inflammatory topics "ran away" with her in the social circle she shared with Macaulay, Knowles found herself a part of James Boswell's mythology about Samuel Johnson's relationships with women. She was a dinner guest at the Dillys' table, and the well-connected brothers invited her for the purpose of irritating the authoritative man with her political and theological arguments. Reports about this dinner from Knowles's friend Anna Seward, and from Knowles herself, have competed with Boswell's in ascertaining whether Johnson was riled about the requisite politeness he was asked to perform de-

spite their disagreement on the argument, or indeed enthused about the famous female Quaker's reading of the New Testament and excited about her claims about women's equality to men. While the mythology surrounding Johnson makes it difficult to access the man's actual position, Seward expressed her appreciation of Knowles's persistence in refusing to adopt Johnson's more conservative politics or defer to his masculine authority even after she and Knowles fell out over their vastly different opinions of the revolution in France.³⁷ A late eighteenth-century report on the conversation, attributed to Knowles, set out to prove that the Quaker's reputation for brilliance had been justified, that she had made substantive arguments, even if her theological position had to compare not only with another theological position, but with the larger-than-life figure of Dr. Johnson.³⁸

One can read letters such as Knowles's as a record of the messy process of engaging simultaneously with the norms of gender, politeness, and epistolary propriety, without assuming that it was the gender of the correspondents that regulated the good form and determined the reciprocity of understanding. To go on about "politics" was both inevitable and tedious for the two women, and it was civil to recognize that the topic "ran away" along with the friendly and legible epistolary persona. If letters were crucial venues of gendered political activity, they can also shed light upon the obstacles to formulating clear statements about the relationship between gender and the formality of writing, clarity of thought, and a straightforward relationship between writers.

A letter from Macaulay to Ryland (1723–92), for instance, is difficult to parse, if for no other reason than because it contains hardly any punctuation. In reply to his repeated query about "What kind of Man will it be proper to elect to the Representative office in the ensuing Parliament," Macaulay writes,

England from the earliest period of its empire to the present moment never was in so perilous so Desperate a state that Country of mine says Sydney (when writing of the situation of England immediately after the restoration of the Stuart Family) is likely to be made a state of Injury to the Liberty which we hoped to established oppressed Luxury and Lewdness set up in its height instead of the piety virtue and sobriety and modesty which we hoped God by our hands would have introduced the best of our nation made a prey to the worst *the parlement the courts the army compted the people enslaved all things vendible no man safe* but by such evil and infamous means as flattery and Bribery this my friend was the description of a man *whose force of imagination whose refined tast whose parity of sentiment and whose experience of better times let him to see and describe the fallen state of his Country in the strangest Creatures* but yet in Sydney's description we find Corruption confined to the parliament the Court and the Army but we live in times when the Empire of corruption has no bounds. Is the parliament the Court and the Army we may add every Corporation through the whole Dominion to every Corporation we may add all the inhabitants which possess the Country at large the ire infection

hath spread from rank to rank it had tainted the vitals of the Commonwealth and from thence extended its putrid influence to all its member self interest that leaven which destroys the process?³⁹

There is a kind of poetry to Macaulay's purported explanation of her disenchantment with the political system. The best equivalent to (if not a description of) the history that informs her political position is a wild torrent of irregular syntax. It is nevertheless delivered with a rhythm and a pattern of repetition, a deliberate disorder, a kind of telegraphy about the strange times, a deployment and refusal of Sydney's allegory, the kind of language apposite to the *agon* Macaulay sees underway on a world-historical scale. The reply ran away with her, as it were, and its apparent escape from the convention may have been a kind of arrival for the person she was addressing: Ryland may have been the kind not to mind such communication, and perhaps its ideal recipient.

Ryland, like Macaulay, alarmed others with apparent resistance to social convention, and impressed them at the same time with his relentless commitment to communal values and ideals. A republican Baptist minister and founder of Enfield Academy, a progressive independent school whose curriculum he designed, Ryland seemed at odds with his time. He showed "untiring zeal for culture and religion" at a time when such commitments seemed mutually exclusive; he was "intensely orthodox" and devoted to "liberal culture like the best of the Humanists," and used his schools as venues for uniting his passions.⁴⁰ Ryland was remembered vividly in the writings by his most devoted students, many of them preachers for religious and political dissent. He appears over and over again in their life narratives (of Ryland and of themselves) as a singular transformative figure, irresistibly fascinating and endlessly odd: "eminently distinguished, though eccentric,"⁴¹ a man whose "eccentricities were numerous and remarkable,"⁴² "possessed of considerable abilities" tempered by "a great deal of what is called *eccentricity*," which "marked not only the manner of his public services, but even his conduct in private life."⁴³ Because of his "peculiar character,"⁴⁴ and because "as a preacher, he was unquestionably a star of the first magnitude,"⁴⁵ there were "ultra-extravaganza tales, that had little, if any, foundation," but which made those hearing them believe "that he was all *outré* and bizarre (as the French would say), and incapable of speaking any thing, but in utter variance from truth and soberness."⁴⁶ His work of preaching was perceived to be unique, "occasionally overstepping the proprieties of the pulpit, but grappling much with conscience, and dealing out the most tremendous blows at error, sin, and the mere forms of godliness."⁴⁷

These accounts of a strange man—of an odd kind of impractical, unaccountable, unconventional masculinity—reveal concerns with deviation from ordinary propriety and its pedestrian concerns, in which Ryland's use of language and reference, like Macaulay's, seems to have been the main indicator of difference. Macaulay's letter was addressed to a man who used language on a

scale different than that binding polite society into conventional and intelligible conversation, for which ethical and political realms converged around concerns with “error” and “sin,” and seemingly petty politicking acquired world-historical (not to say, biblical) proportions. A torrential letter appears an apposite contribution to the conversation about political life with someone whose relationship to the “mere forms of godliness”—i.e., to superficial expressions of ethical consideration couched in religious terms—pointed to the limits of discourse about individual agency and political reform.

While Ryland’s contemporaries and later readers never got tired of calling this rhetoric strange, the obsession with strangeness deflects attention from what the letters do offer, which is a conversation about the limits of the language of commonality and political action. They propose that ethical theology measures “sin” by reluctance to permit daily political action against the corrupt “empire” Macaulay describes, and points the way to change towards more meaningful “forms of godliness.” The letters record how understanding grows around various “eccentricities” which relate theological interpretation and political analysis to the practice of correspondence. There can be eccentricity coterminous with correspondence when letters offer a confident and confidential exchange among those for whom writing in the short, reflexive, circulating form marks the distance between writers and the distance from the regulating forces of a singular politeness, from its arbitrary social norms, its politics of the status quo, and its monolithic linguistic tastes. This is why Macaulay’s correspondence can be read as a process of carving out of a particular epistolary space for social and political action, in which letters test out the capacity of writing to establish correspondences, sustain ambiguously gendered performances, and possibly to impress a capacious writer and reader known for their ability to “see far.”

Letters to Macaulay from the 11th Earl of Buchan (David Stewart Erskine, 1742–1829) run many such tests. They are addressed to a woman unconcerned about the prevalence of politics in her private affairs, by a man discussing without much inhibition the failures of his masculinity. Writing in his twenties from Scotland, where he remained ensconced on his ancestral estate, Buchan reports repeatedly on his inability to cut the kind of masculine figure worthy of London and appropriate to his social status. Deprived of significant inheritance by the wastefulness of his father and grandfather, Buchan strikes a note of pragmatism about his predicament:

I am here alone in a little philosophic retreat which I have betaken myself to not from choice but from necessity, the smallness of my paternal fortune from the successive dilapidations of my predecessors and the defalcations which are necessary to support a widow and four children, render my income so extremely inconsiderable that I am incapacitated from appearing in life with the common Decencies of my Rank and character. This is my apology and it is but too good for a Dereliction of Scenes in which it might have been expected I should have remained and the

removing from which may be construed into the effects of disappointment or of a gloomy misanthropy.⁴⁸

In the letters to Macaulay, Buchan's politics are always the politics of feeling, yet the letters are not an exercise in sentiment indexed feminine. They make a direct connection between the physical retreat from the ostensible center of political and historical dynamism that is London, the kinds of choices such a form of agency makes possible, and consequences apparent to those with whom he is to share the concern for politics. Rather than claim for himself a dominant kind of masculinity, Buchan accounts for his retreat into affect as an opportunity to think about the elusiveness of "authentic" feeling and its relationship to a social and geographical location:

By far the greatest and most exalted in sentiment being unable to bear the dissolution of manners and the general weakness and distemper of the state have betaken themselves to the innocent amusements of rural and domestic life. I do not pretend to declare that I shall remain in this state long but as I am absolutely resolved to preserve my independency by living within my income I must confine in it or amuse and instruct myself by foreign travel without making myself known until matters shall be so situated as to admit of my following a different plan. Marriage I cannot indulge myself with, except it bring me a great dowry or a person of the most moderate dispositions in the department of Luxury.⁴⁹

The letter makes an important distinction between the sentiment in circulation—the fashionable escapism and rusticity of social refinement and urbane malaise—and Buchan's history and motivation in a manifestly similar choice of residence. The vagaries of status and economics demand his physical displacement, but cannot command disaffection. Displacement is inevitably and necessarily related to Buchan's continuing—perhaps even increasing—interest in the possibilities in involvement in the emergent new geographies of the political world under the conditions of deprivation of the resources required to be physically in that world.

The letters are timely and personal, and they are meeting places where the worldly circumstances of both correspondents matter less. Buchan figures Macaulay as a recipient interested in elaborating his fantasy of involvement in the wider world, and addresses her as another thinker and writer who can be presumed not to feel put upon when a letter's focus shifts from acute feelings, personal circumstances, and parochial entertainments, to the transcontinental movement of intelligence and ideological forces. Both of them are privy to these movements regardless of their location, gender, or wealth:

But I am wishing what you know I believe very well about even from the Town talk last winter so I shall proceed to lament with you the state of America from

whence I have had letters lately that make me sad indeed. My god what havoc does the want of wisdom make among our species, what detestable policy flows from that want and what a pleasant thing it is to feel ones self an Enemy to that tyranny that destroys the earth. You must excuse the length of this letter there are very few whom I molest after this manner, but when I sit down to write to Mrs. Macaulay I know not when or where to stop.⁵⁰

Another correspondent whose letters run away, Buchan, like Knowles, suggests that it is writing to Macaulay in particular that makes his letters break the rules of propriety, but the breach of decorum pays a compliment to the recipient. Buchan assumes in Macaulay a great facility in understanding how the letter runs after a thought, which runs after a topic of interest he imagines they share. In response, Macaulay reports having “had the pleasure of seeing lady Buchan and one of your sisters for a few minutes chusing their residence in London.” She reminds him that the work letters do extends from the writing in circulation to the physical encounters in London, where he maintains a kind of presence: his mother and his sister still stay in the city, get to be seen in public gatherings, and then to be mentioned in Macaulay’s letters, representing him in the world in which he desires to be present. To finish off her letter, Macaulay clarifies that these are no conventional social calls or merely private relationships, and takes it upon herself to make the thinking and contribution of an impoverished provincial gentleman relevant to the thought of a prominent political agitator in London: “PS I heard from a third person that your Lordship had done Dr. Priestley the honor to make some very judicious reflections on his essay on government.”⁵¹ Macaulay makes herself the arbiter of importance and circulation of thought and action among the men said to be shaping national political discourse.

Hardly a misanthrope, Buchan spent the rest of his life in Scotland, saturating his local society with his particular presence. By the end of his life, “no man was better known in Scotland,” and not for the lack of effort on the man’s part and the “wonderful measure of personal vanity that distinguished him.”⁵² Perhaps best remembered for attempting in his old age to inform an ailing Sir Walter Scott that he had arranged the details of the novelist’s funeral (his care a token of admiration), Buchan apparently also signed the letters he wrote to different periodicals as “a fortunate daughter of idleness.” In one of those letters he refuted the premise left unstated in “Dean Swift’s famous letter to a young lady on her marriage,” that “women are incapable of becoming truly and logically learned, or of applying the fruits of study to the useful purposes of society.”⁵³ A “tottering, bustling, old, meddlesome coxcomb” to Scott’s biographer,⁵⁴ Buchan has been identified as a person instrumental in getting James Miranda Barry, born with female genitalia, to “attend the University of Edinburgh as a man, qualify in medicine in 1812, and achieve a successful career as an army medical officer.”⁵⁵ Buchan’s life among the landed, cultured, and occa-

sionally impoverished elites of Scotland, its religious leaders and political dissidents, made him appear both outré and bizarre and “ornamental to literature and useful to mankind”⁵⁶—a liminal figure whose status was difficult to set, whose idiosyncrasy was a recommendation and a source of tedium, a grand old failure at the norms of appropriate behavior for a man of his class, annoying to those who found themselves better situated to inhabit the desirable forms of modern masculinity.

On the day of Buchan’s death, Scott wrote to himself that the Earl was “a person whose immense vanity, bordering on insanity, obscured, or rather eclipsed, very considerable talents. His imagination was so fertile, that he seemed to believe the extraordinary fictions which he delighted in telling.” Admired by Scott for saving enough to die wealthy, having paid off his father’s debts from his small income, Buchan had lived to prove, for Scott (the best-selling, trend-setting novelist), that “it is saving, not getting, that is the mother of riches.” The youthful economy, Scott pointed out, did become over the years a “miserable habit”; it led Buchan “to do mean things,” and his wit became “moody and muddish.” Whether what became of the man was inevitable remained hard to tell: Scott “never saw him in his best days,”⁵⁷ and the changing national politics of the day helped to make Buchan appear weird and his ideas outlandish.⁵⁸ Seeing Buchan as a correspondent of Macaulay’s—a writer free to formulate for himself the persona of a failing man—is a helpful reminder about the possibilities of interpretation for various figures living in the shadow of canonical monuments of Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott, the odd figures difficult to reconcile with the dominant accounts of femininity and masculinity, but perhaps interesting to consider in a range of experiences that make up the historical landscape.

THE ENDS OF LETTER READING

Reading the correspondence of Macaulay exposes the problematic ties between the theoretical models which use women’s texts as evidence for the project of recovery and narrative of emancipation, and conventional gender categories. Macaulay’s letters treat gender as a historical index of classification and volatile identification, and not as a stable core that manifests recognizable identities one can appropriate or contest. Attention to the “queerness” of these texts and their writers may be a good reason to read historical sources again, differently.⁵⁹ Seeing how the gendered and the political lives of these figures were difficult (if not impossible) to disentangle, what may be missing in the readings of Macaulay’s writing is a kind of history of the “politics of lifestyle,” in the words of Amanda Vickery.⁶⁰ In other words, we may need the opposite of what we normally do: not an estrangement of the familiar canonical figures, but a way to understand the oddities done and discussed by the likes of Catharine Macaulay or Lord Buchan, or “remembered” in the publications by Ryland’s pupils,

as political moves that were in themselves designed to redraw the ambit of meaningful interaction—of correspondence. The resistance of their contemporaries to their eccentricities, much like the embarrassment of modern-day critics and historians at the material such strangeness left behind, is a resistance to a discussion about the conventions of political action and its relationship to the canon. It is recognition of the extent to which recovery of historical figures remains beholden to the proprieties of traditional gender roles and their relationship to writing, publication, and interpretation. When Beckwith says of Macaulay in the 1950s that she was “queer in all ways,” her meaning is not far from what the word could name now, when “queer theory” has become not just “a way of cutting against mandatory gender divisions,” but a way to organize thinking and action away from prevailing tastes (the relationship between gender, culture, and economics), out of a “dissatisfaction with the regime of the normal in general.”⁶¹

One consequence of such reading would be a recognition of the canon as the field of reading which normalizes the style and philosophical doctrine of a few prominent writers. Thus we could take another look at the way in which Austen and Scott become “real,” but also at Percy Bysshe Shelley, a reader of Macaulay sympathetic to her ideas about historiography as a record of endless disappointment, who “began to humanize his own historiographical procedures” so as to get away from the omniscience and abstraction of conventional historiography, qualities usually associated with masculinity.⁶² If we could see Shelley’s project as a way to sever the ties between gender norms and genres of writing, we could see the poet as neither a “historiographical transvestite” nor a “transsexual,” but as a writer interested instead in a kind of historiography whose individuated agents could investigate the affective origins of action, without presuming that the relationship among femininity, individuality, and affect-as-interiority is fixed or ahistorical.⁶³

Macaulay’s correspondence divorces abilities and activities from the category of gender and stands against a genealogy of literature as a tradition of corrosive liberal critique and emancipatory thought. A writing milieu hospitable to both men and women, the letters make a still-radical proposition that Macaulay, at the end of the eighteenth century, had written not from her femininity, but rather performed it into the expectations of, and in anticipation of, the notions of gender difference. Macaulay’s relationship to conventional gender norms, then, may have been that of superficial accommodation, rather than that of overt critique or thematic intervention. The figure of a “female historian” was a nod to the conventional understanding of the relationship between gender and genre, offered with the writing that, according to the logic of that relationship, should have been impossible to do.

This is why to write about Macaulay is to make a disclosure about the degree to which women’s writing has to be a form of (auto)biography, a history of writing *about* women and writing *as* women whose recourse to pen and press gave expres-

sion to their knowledge of injustice. The gravitational pull of canonical literature as the field to which to adjoin the “best” of women’s writing assumes the solidity of ties between hierarchies of gender and literary categories, and distracts from the examination of assumptions about the relationship between gender and genre. Foregrounding those ties would make it possible to investigate how literature’s normativity (invisibility, universality, masculinity, etc.) requires the notion of an authentic relationship between gender and particular genres of writing. A body of correspondence such as Macaulay’s excites questions about the sources of its own obscurity and strangeness: about the kinds of company in which we look for women, about the kinds of scholarship women’s writing permits, and about the fields of knowledge in which the findings get strategically nested. Making discipline out of re-reading in the odd company can show us more about how writing grants women experience, how it makes men and women memorable, and how scholarly claims made about women’s writing become claims about women, once we believe we know them because we have read their letters.

NOTES

1. Mildred Chaffee Beckwith, “Catharine Macaulay, Eighteenth-Century Rebel,” (PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 1953), 94.

2. Deirdre Le Faye, preface to *Jane Austen’s Letters*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1995), xviii.

3. George Otto Trevelyan, *The American Revolution*, 8 vols. (New York, 1903), 3:253.

4. Carolyn Steedman, “A Woman Writing a Letter,” in *Epistolary Selves*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot, 1999), 111–33, 118.

5. See Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (London, 2008); Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson, eds., *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860* (Basingstoke, 2000); *Epistolary Selves*; Keith Stewart, “Towards Defining an Aesthetic for the Familiar Letter in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Prose Studies* (1982): 179–92; Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen* (Chicago, 1986); and William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices* (Chapel Hill, 1998).

6. Steedman, 119.

7. Bridget Hill, “The Links Between Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay: New Evidence,” *Women’s History Review* 4, no. 2 (1995): 177–92.

8. Kate Davies, “Revolutionary Correspondence: Reading Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren,” *Women’s Writing* 13, no. 1 (2006): 73–97.

9. Davies, *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren* (Oxford, 2006), 23.

10. See Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Women’s History’ in Transition: The European Case,” *Feminist Studies* 3/4 (1976): 83–103; Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism* (New York, 2013), 7; Joan W. Scott, “Women in History. The Modern Period,” *Past & Present* 101 (1983): 141–57; Steedman, “‘Public’ and ‘Private’ in Women’s Lives,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3, no. 3 (1990): 294–304; and Amanda Vickery, “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,” *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 383–414.

11. See William Stafford, *English Feminists and Their Opponents in the 1790s* (Manchester, 2002); Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment* (Princeton, 2000); and Devoney Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670–1820* (Baltimore, 2000).

12. See Catharine Macaulay, *A Modest Plea for the Property of Copy Right* (Bath, 1774), *Loose Remarks on Certain Positions to Be Found in Mr. Hobbes’s Philosophical Rudiments of Government and Society* (London, 1767), *A Treatise on the Immutability of Moral Truth* (Lon-

don, 1783), *Observations on a Pamphlet, Entitled, Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (London, 1770), *Observations on the Reflections of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, on the Revolution in France in a letter to the Right Hon. the Earl of Stanhope* (London, 1790), and *Letters on Education* (London, 1790).

13. Mary Hays, *Female Biography*, 6 vols. (London, 1803), 5:292.

14. See Lucy M. Donnelly, "The Celebrated Mrs. Macaulay," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1949): 173–207; Claire G. Fox, "Catharine Macaulay, An Eighteenth-Century Clio," *Winterthur Portfolio* 4 (1968): 129–42; and Davis, "Gender and Genre: Women as Historical Writers, 1400–1820," in *Beyond Their Sex*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New York, 1980), 153–82.

15. For biographers' trouble with Macaulay's neglecting to heed rules of propriety, see Bridget Hill, *The Republican Virago: The Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay* (Oxford, 1992), 103. About Macaulay's failure to write a novel, see Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (Brighton, 1983), 12.

16. Beckwith, 50.

17. See Karen Green, "Liberty and Virtue in Catharine Macaulay's Enlightenment Philosophy," *Intellectual History Review* 22, no. 3 (2012): 411–26; Green and Shannon Weekes, "Catharine Macaulay on the Will," *History of European Ideas* 39, no. 3 (2013): 409–25; Wendy Gunther-Canada, "The Politics of Sense and Sensibility: Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay Graham on Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*," in *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, ed. Hilda L. Smith (Cambridge, 1998), 126–47, and "Catharine Macaulay on the Paradox of Paternal Authority in Hobbesian Politics," *Hypatia* 21, no. 2 (2006): 150–73; and Susan Staves, "Liberty of a She-Subject of England: Rights Rhetoric and the Female Thucydides," *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 1 (1989): 161–83.

18. See Davis, "History's Two Bodies," *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 1 (1988): 1–30; Philip Hicks, "Catharine Macaulay's Civil War: Gender, History, and Republicanism in Georgian Britain," *Journal of British Studies* 41, no. 2 (2002): 170–98; Bridget Hill and Christopher Hill, "Catharine Macaulay's History and Her Catalogue of Tracts," *Seventeenth Century* 8, no. 2 (1993): 269–85; Greg Kucich, "Romanticism and Feminist Historiography," *Wordsworth Circle* 24, no. 3 (1993): 133–40, and "'This Horrid Theatre of Human Sufferings': Gendering the Stages of History in Catharine Macaulay and Percy Bysshe Shelley," in *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion*, ed. Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (Durham, 1998), 448–65; Laura Mandell, "Virtue and Evidence: Catharine Macaulay's Historical Realism," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2004): 127–57; Donald T. Siebert, "Catherine Macaulay's *History of England*: Antidote to Hume's History?," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 303 (1992): 393–96; Lynne E. Withey, "Catharine Macaulay and the Uses of History: Ancient Rights, Perfectionism, and Propaganda," *Journal of British Studies* 16, no. 1 (1976): 59–83; and D. R. Woolf, "A Feminine Past?: Gender, Genre, and Historical Knowledge in England, 1500–1800," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 3 (1997): 645–79.

19. See Florence Boos, "Catharine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790): An Early Feminist Polemic," *University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies* 2, no. 2 (1976): 64–78; and Connie Titone, *Gender Equality in the Philosophy of Education* (New York, 2004).

20. Beckwith, 50.

21. See the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, www.gilderlehrman.org/collections. Davies explains that additional items exist in various collections in the United States (*Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren*, 17).

22. Macaulay, *The History of England, from the Revolution to the Present Time In a Series of Letters to the Reverend Doctor Wilson* (Bath and London, 1778).

23. See *The Critical Review* 45 (1778): 131.

24. Philip Millet to Macaulay, 9 November 1789, GLC (Gilder Lehrman Collection) 1794.42.

25. Catharine Macaulay Graham to Capel Lofft, 12 November 1789, GLC 1794.43.
26. Brant, 5.
27. Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Forgotten Genres," *Modern Language Studies* 18, no. 1 (1988): 47–57, 56.
28. Brant, 15.
29. Macaulay gets praise for her transgression from Lord Harcourt, who had anticipated her good reception in Paris, where "they pay more regard than we do, to geniuses and literary merit, and those are united in a woman who moreover possesses a manly spirit and a strong and manly eloquence" (Lord Harcourt to Macaulay, 25 January 1779, GLC 1794.14).
30. The authoritative biography of Mary Knowles is Judi Jennings, *Gender, Religion and Radicalism in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Burlington, 2006).
31. James Jenkins, *The Records and Recollections of James Jenkins* (Lewiston, 1984), 201.
32. Bridget Hill, *Republican Virago*, 16. See also Vickery's introduction (1–54, esp. 28–34) and Kathryn Gleadle, "British Women and Radical Politics in the Late Nonconformist Enlightenment, c. 1780–1830," in *Women, Privilege, and Power*, ed. Vickery (Stanford, 2001), 123–51.
33. Jennings, 11.
34. Jennings, 22.
35. Knowles is on the record for anti-Semitic remarks, and a long friendship with Jane Harry, daughter of a plantation owner and a Jamaican woman of color, whose religious capacity Knowles discussed with Samuel Johnson.
36. Knowles to Macaulay, 27 December 1774, GLC 1794.37.
37. See Jennings, 49–71.
38. Knowles, *Dialogue between Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Knowles* (London, 1799).
39. Macaulay to John Collett Ryland, August 1773, GLC 1794.21, emphasis added.
40. James Culross, *The Three Rylands* (London, 1897), 2.
41. George Pritchard Newman, *Memoir of the Rev. William Newman D. D.* (London, 1837), 9.
42. John Webster Morris, *Biographical Recollections of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.* (London, 1833), 30.
43. William Field, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Town and Castle of Warwick and of the Neighbouring Spa of Leamington* (Warwick, 1815), 140.
44. William Jay, *The Autobiography of the Rev. William Jay* (London, 1855), 323.
45. William Newman, *Rylandiana* (London, 1835), 12.
46. William Newman, v.
47. Jay, 324.
48. Lord Buchan to Macaulay, 4 September 1768, GLC 1794.04.
49. Lord Buchan to Macaulay, 4 September 1768.
50. Lord Buchan to Macaulay, 4 September 1768.
51. Macaulay to the Earl of Buchan, 9 June 1769, GLC 1794.06.
52. Alexander Ferguson, Lady Elizabeth Caroline Bligh, and Lady Elizabeth Cust, *The Honourable Henry Erskine, Lord Advocate for Scotland* (London, 1882), 478.
53. David Stewart Erskine, *The Anonymous and Fugitive Essays of the Earl of Buchan, Collected from Various Periodical Works* (Edinburgh, 1812), 26–28.
54. John Gibson Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1837), 2:349.
55. "David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan (1742–1829) Founder of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland," University of Edinburgh, at www.docs.is.ed.ac.uk/docs/lib-archive/bgallery/Gallery/records/eighteen/erskine.html. For a detailed biography of James Barry, see Hercules Michael Du Preez, "Dr. James Barry: The Early Years Revealed," *South African Medical Journal* 98, no. 1 (2008): 52–62.
56. Ferguson, Bligh, and Cust, 478.

57. John Gibson Lockhart, *Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott*, 5 vols. (New York, 1900), 5:249–50.

58. B. P. Lenman, "Aristocratic 'Country' Whiggery in Scotland and the American Revolution," in *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment*, ed. R. B. Sher and J. R. Smitten (Princeton, 1990), 180–92.

59. Michael Warner explains that the promise of queer theory has been to "mess up the desexualized spaced of the academy, exude some rut, reimagine the publics from and for which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform," (introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* [Minneapolis, 1993], vii–xxxi, xxvi).

60. Vickery, introduction to *Women, Privilege, and Power*, 30.

61. Warner, xxvi–xxvii.

62. Kucich, "Horrid Theatre," 458–62.

63. Kucich, "Horrid Theatre," 462.

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