

Bathsua (Reginald) Makin (c.1600–c. 1675)

'God intended woman as a help-meet to man, in his constant conversation, and in the concerns of his family and his estate, when he should most need, in sickness, weakness, absences, death, & c. Whilst we neglect to fit them for these things he hath appointed women for, we renounce God's blessing, are ungrateful to him, cruel to them, and injurious to ourselves...'

An Essay to revive the antient education of gentlewomen, in religion, manners, arts & tongues. With an answer to the objections against this way of education (London: Printed by J. D., to be sold by Tho. Parkhurst, at the Bible and Crown, at the lower end of Cheapside, 1673), 1st ed.

by Janet Todd

Makin's tract is considered the first publication by an Englishwoman to advocate the serious education of girls.

Inspired by the writings of her more famous correspondent Anna Marie van Schurman, a Dutch scholar and the first woman ever admitted as a student to Utrecht University, Bathsua Makin attacked a 'Barbarous custom to breed Women low' and called on society to recognize women as reasonable creatures who would benefit from learning. But Makin's pamphlet is also grounded in religious thought declaring that an educational reform would yield not only practical benefits to family life and the nation as a whole but also to an individual's moral life: 'Learning perfects and adorns the soul', she believed. Though sometimes frowned upon by twentieth-century feminists for its elitism—An Essay is, after all, targeting exclusively ladies and gentlewomen whom 'God has blessed with the things of this world'—and its reluctance to assert women's equality in the public sphere, Makin's rhetorical strategy is in fact remarkably modern. She attributes women's intellectual deficiencies to social conditioning, not inherent inferiority:

'I know no better way to reform ... than to persuade women to scorn [the] toys and trifles, they now spend their time about, and to attempt higher things, here offered: this will either reclaim the men; or make them ashamed to claim the sovereignty over such as are more wise and virtuous than themselves.'

To achieve her educational revolution, Makin proposed a broad curriculum that covered traditional feminine accomplishments of needlework, dancing, singing and keeping accounts but also included more innovative subjects such as English grammar, French, Latin, geography, arithmetic, astronomy, natural philosophy, and even exotic options such as Greek and Hebrew.

Makin' educational model probably reflected much of her own childhood learning. Growing up in her father's school in St Mary Axe Street, London, she proved a child prodigy: fluent in Greek, Latin, and French, she was also acquainted with Hebrew, German, Spanish, and Italian. At only sixteen she produced her first publication, *MVSA VIRGINEA Graeco-Latino-Gallica* (1616), a short volume of epigraphs and encomiums in six languages dedicated to members of the royal Stuart family. If the book was conceived to win her royal patronage it failed—when a copy was presented to James I, the erudite but narrow-minded monarch responded unkindly: “But can she spin?”

Unlike the target audience of *An Essay* which had been blessed with riches, Makin struggled with financial hardship throughout her life. In around 1640 she took up a position as tutor to Princess Elizabeth, second daughter of King Charles I, and after the young girl's sudden death she accepted another tutorial post, this time to Lucy Hastings, Dowager Countess of Huntingdon, and her children. At some point after this employment had ended in 1662, Makin established her own school for girls at Tottenham High Cross, on the outskirts of London. There she offered the unconventional curriculum advocated by *An Essay*.

Further details of Makin's later life remain sketchy—it is unknown how successful her educational establishment was, how long she continued her teaching, even when she died. It would be wonderful to have a letter from one of her pupils, but sadly none has been found.