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Catharine Macaulay's Republican Conception of Social and Political Liberty

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Abstract

Catharine Macaulay was one of the most significant republican writers of her generation. Although there has been a revival of interest in Macaulay among feminists and intellectual historians, neo-republican writers have yet to examine the theoretical content of her work in any depth. Since she anticipates and addresses a number of themes that still preoccupy republicans, this neglect represents a serious loss to the discipline. I examine Macaulay's conception of freedom, showing how she uses the often misunderstood notion of virtue to reconcile the individual and collective elements inherent in the republican model. In her own analysis of the deep-rooted social obstacles that stand in the way of women becoming free, Macaulay identifies a serious problem that confronts all republicans, namely how to secure freedom in the face of entrenched structural imbalances that systematically disadvantage certain classes of person. In the end, I conclude that Macaulay herself cannot overcome the issues she raises. This in no way diminishes the importance of her work since her diagnosis is as relevant today as in her own time.

Keywords

Catharine Macaulay, republicanism, freedom, non-domination, feminism

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In her time, Catharine Macaulay had a deserved reputation as one of England's leading intellectuals. As a republican writer, in particular, her contemporary influence was immense. She corresponded with leading figures in the American Revolution, such as James Otis, George Washington and John Adams, and can plausibly be identified as having first used the phrase 'the equal rights of men' (Green, 2016: 39–40). Her two most celebrated works, *The History of England* (1763–1783) and *Letters on Education* (1790), stand out as exemplary texts within the republican tradition. In spite of this, until recently to modern readers Macaulay remained an obscure figure within intellectual history. Even now there are no widely available critical scholarly editions of her key works. As interest in the overlooked contribution of women philosophers has burgeoned in the last two

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decades, so there has been a renewed academic focus on Macaulay's thought.[1] Somewhat surprisingly, however, republican philosophers themselves have yet to examine the theoretical content of her work in any depth. The scope and richness of her work stand favourably in comparison with any of the acknowledged historical republican sources, including her contemporaries Richard Price, Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine, so this neglect both does Macaulay a disservice and represents a loss to the discipline.

My focus will be on just one aspect of Macaulay's republicanism, namely her understanding of freedom articulated as independence from arbitrary power. In the republican tradition, freedom and independence are synonymous, and Macaulay often uses them interchangeably. Independence is, however, a complex and broad term that encompasses more than merely the freedom to make choices. In the republican context, independence represents a condition in which a person is protected from being subject to any arbitrary, or unconstrained, power.[2] This protection must be robust and not subject to the vagaries and uncertainties of any particular person's, or group of people's, will. For republicans such protection comes in the form of the law. Individuals are independent under a properly constructed law that upholds their interests as freemen while preventing others from violating those interests. This law has, of course, to be created and then supported, which requires the support of others in the community. Republicans have long considered the motivation for individuals to provide this support to lie in an idea of virtue, which was traditionally considered to be integrally tied to the notion of freedom as independence itself. This appeal to virtue has given rise to a longstanding difficulty for republicans about how a free society can be established from within an existing unfree one in which the requisite virtue is lacking.

Macaulay's solution is structured around the twin goals of educating the population to think critically and introducing institutional reforms that constrain the actions of those in government and so enabling the now-educated population to hold their political leaders to account. In her later work, however, Macaulay also identifies an important line of criticism which not only challenges her own position but also remains a serious issue for republicans today. This concerns the threat to people's independence that comes from biased social attitudes and structural imbalances in the organisation of society which inhibit both critical thinking and the impartial functioning of republican institutions, thereby stifling minority voices and systematically favouring the established interests of the dominant classes. Macaulay develops her arguments in the context of women's continuing social and political disempowerment, analysing the issue subtly and in detail. This was something no male republican would do until well into our own century.

While I argue that Macaulay develops an impressive systematic republican model of freedom as independence, in the end, I conclude that her own internal critique is stronger than the solutions she has at her disposal. While this may be slightly disappointing, it should not detract from her importance as a pioneer of republican theory. Her analysis of structural domination and gender remains very potent and represents one of the defining moments in feminist republican writing.[3] This analysis was to have a major influence on Mary Wollstonecraft who explicitly adapted and extended Macaulay's insights developing them into, as I have argued elsewhere, an important republican contribution to the general problem of systematic social and structural domination (Coffee, 2013, 2014).[4]

The structure of this article is as follows. In the next section, I articulate Macaulay's republican framework, discussing the integral roles that virtue, reason and the common good have in her notion of political freedom. In the following section, I examine her

argument that education, institutional design and public policy can deal with the threats to our collective virtue, thereby protecting social freedom. In the section on social and cultural domination, I show how Macaulay's analysis of gendered social relations – which is given in republican terms – represents a challenge to her own overall republican framework by exposing a tension between the reliance on reason and virtue as the foundation of freedom and the undermining effect that social structures and culture have on these. In the concluding section, I briefly outline the direction in which Wollstonecraft takes Macaulay's work in responding to this challenge.

Independence, Virtue and the Common Good

In the introduction to her *History of England*, Macaulay sets out her republican framework. She follows the lead of the classical accounts that 'exhibit liberty in its most exalted state' (Macaulay, 1783 [1763]: v). Her principal motive for writing is to 'measure the virtue of those who have influenced the nation's public liberty' which is another way of saying that she will judge them according to republican standards (Macaulay, 1783 [1763]: vii). In addition to identifying freedom as the primary republican value, she immediately establishes the link between freedom and virtue. There is, she says, a 'natural love of freedom which lies latent in the breast of every rational being, till it is nipped by the frost of prejudice, or blasted by the influence of vice' (Macaulay, 1783 [1763]: v). Virtue is given as having two particular opposites: prejudice and vice.[5] These correspond to two distinct but related senses of virtue, both of which are required for a free way of life.[6]

At root, republicans are committed to an ideal of self-government. This is both an individual and a collective concept, although it is grounded in the concern that individuals should govern their behaviour according to their own wills rather than being controlled externally by the wills of others. Crucially, republicans understand this idea of control in terms of relationships of power rather than of actual coercion. To be truly self-governing, which is to be free, it cannot be mere chance that we do not experience any unwanted interference. Rather, we must be beyond its reach. In republican terms, this means that we must be independent of the discretionary (or arbitrary) power that others might wield over us. Freedom of this kind is understood to be only possible in community with others for the simple reason that outside of society we would be exposed to the potential of unrestrained power from anyone that happened to cross our path. Even lone individuals or hermits are not truly independent in this sense since they cannot escape the danger that groups of bandits might find and overpower them. Independence requires a strong force to back it up, which requires the cooperation of others. Freedom is, therefore, a necessarily social ideal. Republicans take the force that enables freedom to be the law. This law inevitably faces a delicate task. If it is to guarantee rather than threaten my independence, it must reflect my ideas about what I wish to do. If it does this for me, it must do so for all those others over whom it governs on pain of being arbitrary for them.

An important part of why virtue is necessary for freedom is because of the role it plays in identifying and maintaining the common good of the population. As we shall see, it takes virtue on the part of the population to identify the common good, and virtue is necessary in order to sustain a commitment to uphold this ideal.[7] The republican focus on the common good is not only pragmatic but also theoretical. The arbitrary power which republicans consider to be incompatible with freedom is understood as power that is not

constrained to act in the collective interests of the people under its control. The republican project, then, is partly one of identifying an idea of the collective goals that genuinely represents the whole population and partly one of motivating each person to internalise these goals as being their own. 'When the happiness of an individual is properly considered', Macaulay argues, 'his interest will be found so intimately connected with the interests of society of which he is a member, that he cannot act in conformity to the one, without having a proper consideration for the other. But reason will revolt against a service for which it finds no adequate return' (Macaulay, 1790); adding that 'when we admire the virtue of the ancients, we admire only that inflexible conduct which carried them to sacrifice every personal interest to principle' (Macaulay, 1790: 169).

The first sense in which Macaulay uses the term virtue is with reference to a person's capacity and willingness to submit in their behaviour to the dictates of reason. To have virtue in this sense contrasts with having prejudice. 'To read virtue right', according to Macaulay (1790: 79), 'we must divest ourselves of all partialities and prejudices', the reason being that 'opinions taken up on mere authority, must ever prevent original thinking, must stop the progress of improvement, and instead of producing rational agents, can only make man the mere ape of man'.[8] 'Reason', by contrast, 'is always liable to discern the moral difference of things, whenever they are fairly and plainly proposed'. This 'establishes an immutable and abstract fitness in a more satisfactory manner than what is called a moral consciousness from innate principles', which merely represents 'an arbitrary law imposed on our nature' (Macaulay, 1790: 121). The ability to reason, therefore, is part of virtue because it enables us to identify what is moral. To act virtuously is also to act freely.

Macaulay's reference to 'an arbitrary law' above shows the republican rationale behind this. Freedom does not consist in simply being able to do whatever one pleases. Rather, it is a matter of subjecting oneself to a law that always reflects one's best interests. If we act according to our passions, our desires, our unreflective opinions, or prejudices, or even as Macaulay says, on our innate moral sense, then we have no assurance that these really will be best for us. These are unreliable guides because they are not grounded in principle. Reason, however, is reflected in God's own mind, whose nature is rational and who has ensured that its demands are always in our own interests.[9] Reason is, therefore, the only non-arbitrary standard by which to govern our conduct. While acting virtuously in this way makes individuals free, by extension it is a necessary condition for social freedom. Only virtuous citizens are able to divest themselves from their prejudices and self-interest to identify those laws which would reflect the common good and so establish a free state.

The second sense in which Macaulay uses virtue is with reference to the kinds of behaviours and dispositions that citizens should display. The focus is once again on supporting the institutions that promote the common good. So where Macaulay refers to 'vice' above she has in mind the tendency to put private interests ahead of the public good.[10] In this context, her concern is with the sentiments that motivate our behaviour rather than with their rational basis. Macaulay (1790: 70, 171) identifies certain fundamental dispositions that underpin virtuous behaviour, emphasising in particular benevolence ('of so comprehensive a nature, that it contains the principle of every moral duty') and equity (from which 'all human virtue will be found to proceed'), both of which are necessary for sympathy (where all 'human virtue must derive its source from this useful affection'). If the population is not disposed to display these foundational virtues in sufficient quantity, then commitment to the common good will break down leading to disunity and the pursuit of private over collective interests. As we shall see, not only does this

give an opportunity to the unscrupulous to subvert the political process but it also triggers a breakdown in public deliberation with partisan arguments displacing a concern for the truth and the best argument; a situation which Macaulay argues lies at the root of prejudice.

If a society's laws are to embody the common good they must meet at least two conditions. First, they must be endorsed by the people they govern. Laws imposed on an unwilling population are necessarily arbitrary (unless 'the people have authority enough .. there can be no liberty', (Macaulay, 1767: 31)). Second, laws must conform to the requirements of reason in the light of the facts as they are known. Such laws will be in everyone's interests, since we share the same basic rational nature, and will embody the appropriate standards of morality that bind us all. Laws that satisfy these conditions will be non-arbitrary and suitable for governing a free society. In theory, devising non-arbitrary laws should not be difficult. 'The principles and notions, upon which the doctrine of arbitrary power is established' Macaulay (1783 [1763]: viii) argues, are 'absurd' and can only be defended by 'fraud and sophistry'. The problem is, of course, that fraud and sophistry were as rife in her society as they are perhaps in ours.

In principle, according to Macaulay, there is no reason why a sufficiently wise, educated and virtuous individual or group (in the form of 'an impartial tribunal [of] men trusted in the higher offices of the state', (Macaulay, 1783 [1763]: *vi*)) could not create a system of policies and laws to protect freedom.[11] In practice, of course, Macaulay recognises that we cannot trust our leaders with this task since the risks are great and the list of complications that could go wrong long. Modern societies (meaning Macaulay's own) simply do not have the systems and institutions needed to first produce capable ministers and then to constrain them as they exercise power. The role of restraint, she argues, belongs to the people. While 'individuals may err', she says, 'the public judgement is infallible' so long as they have a 'just information of facts to make proper comment' (Macaulay, 1783 [1763]: *x*). With this in mind, Macaulay (1767: 29–30) believes that the ideal form of government would be a 'democratical system' balanced between two chambers, in which the people serve as a restraint on the power of the elected senators. With suitable measures to prevent the abuse of power – including the separation of powers, term limits, the rotation of offices and land reform – Macaulay argues that a cabinet of elite senators could come to identify what is in the common good, and that suitably constrained from the possibility of abusing their power, they would direct their ambition and energies towards securing the public rather than their own private interest.

This system places a heavy burden of responsibility on the people. The problem is, however, that as things stood the majority were not up to it. 'The vulgar', she observes:

> are at all times liable to be deceived, and this nation has ever produced a number of bad citizens, who, prone to be corrupted, have been the ready tools of wicked ministers and the zealous partizans, in a cause big with the ruin of the state and the destruction of the felicity which the individuals in the country have for some years enjoyed (Macaulay, 1783 [1763]: *viii*).

The problem starts with the very young but eventually spreads, undermining the virtue of the whole of society and its culture. People will discharge their civic duties, according to Macaulay (1790: 19), if they are taught well, according to immutable principles rather than temporary conveniences. Education must be constructed around giving students independence of mind, building first wisdom and understanding, and then character and

virtue. In reality, however, children are not trained either to think for themselves or to behave virtuously but are rather 'brought up in the doctrine of a necessary servitude and are taught to regard the champions of liberty as the disturbers of the peace of mankind' (Macaulay, 1783 [1763]: *x*). Instead of challenging what they hear, students merely ingest the 'prejudices of the authors with whom they have conversed, as if these prejudices were the produce of their own imaginations' (Macaulay, 1783 [1763]: *xi*). While this gives them the feeling of knowledge, in reality they become merely the servants of those who design their curriculum.

The result is a population consisting of dupes easily led by the 'villainous purposes' of the self-interested elite who then install a political structure designed to exploit these purposes. Corrupt parties, she observes, have 'prevented the establishing of any regular system to preserve or improve [the people's] liberties'. Rather than to serve the common good, politics comes to be conducted along factional lines, based on bribery and patronage rather than on an idea of public service. Macaulay (1783 [1763]: *xv*) highlights three specific types of issue in the pervasive lure of emoluments, the fear that individuals have of being abandoned by their associates and hence left without assistance, and the ridicule that anyone who remains honest in this corrupt system will face. This combination not only rewards corruption and prevents reform but it also creates a general culture in which people accept arbitrary rule as natural and even celebrate it.

Reason, Government and Education

Through a combination of philosophical reflection, empirical data gathering and public deliberation, it should be possible for a population to determine the policies that would maintain public virtue. The problem is that in order for these tools to be successful, there must already be a sufficient stock of virtue. Unfortunately, Macaulay argues, the long-standing neglect of public morals has led the citizens to accept seductive but oppressive norms instead of making a principled study of the art of government. As yet, she regrets that theorists 'have made no accurate definitions either on the duties of government, or on the duties of a good citizen; and individuals, from the prevalent power of custom and precept, are content with privations which have no foundation in the common good' (Macaulay, 1790: 169).

There is circularity involved here that is an instance of a general problem for republicans, namely that a society cannot become free without virtuous citizens but citizens cannot become virtuous unless they are first free.[12]

Macaulay starts from the premise that it is possible for governments to determine the level of public virtue. In their socialised state, she describes humans as 'artificial beings' who are shaped by a myriad of forces that influence them throughout their lives (Macaulay, 1790: 7, 10). These determine the kinds of people we will turn out to be. In our natural state, the capacity to act virtuously or not lies latent within each of us. How these are developed is a function of the environment in which we are brought up.[13] The characteristics of that environment are contingent and can be controlled, to a large degree, by government policy. 'Social man' she argues, 'is a mere artificial being, and when you have the power of moulding him, it is your own fault if his fashion does not fit your purposes' (Macaulay, 1790: 10). This places a heavy burden of responsibility on those in office. Indeed, in respect of promoting virtue, governments are said to have a 'parental'

duty to their citizens that is stronger even than children can expect from their natural parents (Macaulay, 1790: 170).

If this obligation is to be fulfilled, according to Macaulay (1790: 171), the solution must lie in 'the education of the people'. She uses this term 'in the most extensive sense of this word' where this consists of a comprehensive range of measures, including what she describes as 'good laws, good examples, good customs, a proper use of the arts, and wise instructions'. The scale of what is entailed here should not be underestimated:

> The culture of that artificial being, a social man, is in its nature so complex, there are so many evils to be avoided, so many important ends to be pursued; there is such a delicate machine to work upon, and so much to be apprehended from external cause that the intervention of the learned may be employed for ages, before such a system of education can be framed as will admit of no improvement (Macaulay, 1790: *vi*).

Complexity, however, does not mean the situation is hopeless. Macaulay (1790: 12–13) is confident that with 'the assistance of wise laws and a correspondent example', governments might go a long way towards countering the harmful effects that hinder a person's moral development, such as by ignorant and neglectful parents, eventually even effecting 'a total change in his opinions and sentiments'. Government inattention on these matters, by contrast, can be disastrous. The example of the Roman Republic, she believes, bears this out, serving as an 'incontrovertible example of the effect of accident, situation, and government on national character and prosperity' first positively but in the end tragically (Macaulay, 1790: 161). Initially, the laws, the example, the precepts and the active wisdom of Numa Pompilius, Rome's second king, 'gave to Roman manners and customs a superiority over all the states of Italy' (Macaulay, 1790: 162), while later the example of 'Cincinnatus returning from conquest and sovereign rule to cultivate his little farm with his own hands, presents to the mind the sublimest image of national character that human society can afford' (Macaulay, 1790: 161). The destruction of Carthage and the subjection of Greece brought about a wholesale change in Roman culture. While poverty and a simplicity of manner had been admirable qualities in a leader, conveying the idea of an incorruptible integrity, for example, these came to be despised (Macaulay, 1790: 159). Wealth and grandeur were courted by the elite, and this example filtered down through the population. This led to an 'entire change of manners and sentiments in the Roman people produc[ing] as an entire a change in their public and domestic education' (Macaulay, 1790: 160).

The case of Rome is instructive because it is culture – led by the example of public figures but spread through the behaviour of people in their daily lives – that is seen to be the principal driver of the level of public virtue. Macaulay (1790: 160) observes that 'the precepts of a philosophical tutor delivered in the schools could not act as a counterbalance to the weight of parental influence, the contagion of example, and those various modes which are employed by corrupt persons'. It is interesting, therefore, to note that while Macaulay (1790: 10–14) is wary of giving governments the enormous power of controlling the education of their populations through any sort of national school system, she nevertheless acknowledges that they retain a far greater influence that comes with having the power to make laws and set an example. The deeper reason for resisting any form of nationalised education, then, would seem to be the second reason that she gives which is that while 'a public education may be formed on the very best plan; [and] may be conducted by the wisest rules … it may fall short of what may be effected by domestic

instruction' (Macaulay, 1790: 13).[14] In other words, even the job of improving formal education is, in some ways at least, best achieved through the informal processes of the home and daily life.

The regeneration of public virtue must reflect the manner in which people learn. This follows two broad paths, by experience and through reason. 'It is', Macaulay (1790: 15) says, 'by an extensive knowledge of the relation of things, and the effects of causes, by which our reason becomes a more valuable gift than those instinctive powers which nature has bestowed'. Ultimately, reason is the anchor that ensures that people are not led astray and keeps them grounded in truth. 'Logic', she argues, 'which is undoubtedly a necessary part of tuition, as it can alone enable us to defend ourselves against the wiles of sophistry, will necessarily make us adepts in the defence of error' (Macaulay, 1790: 105). The ability to reason clearly plays a fundamental role in a person's capacity for virtue, since 'to read virtue right, we must divest ourselves of all partialities and prejudices' (Macaulay, 1790: 79). The most efficient way to equip the population to do this is to teach people to understand the 'immutable principles' that underpin morality, and so discouraging them from focusing on contingent and inconstant considerations and conveniences (Macaulay, 1790: 123–126). There is, she argues, 'no cultivation which yields so promising a harvest as the cultivation of the understanding; and that a mind, irradiated by the clear light of wisdom, must be equal to every task which reason imposes on it' (Macaulay, 1790: 31).

While the ability to reason is necessary for virtue, it is not sufficient. The virtues of the mind, Macaulay (1790: 65) argues, 'must be accompanied with that tenderness of feeling which produces the most valuable of all excellencies, an unconfined benevolence', which as we have noted is the source of all the other virtues. A formal education, she goes on, is of no use in cultivating people's benevolence. 'It is example only which can fire the mind to an emulation of disinterested actions, which can call its attention to distresses without itself; and by a retrospect of its own capabilities of misery, can teach it with the celerity of thought to transport itself into the situation of the suffering object' (Macaulay, 1790: 72).[15]

While reason might ground our thinking, it can only work with what people receive through their sense organs. This is why Macaulay (1790: 15) describes experience as 'the only efficacious instructor of man'. We learn far more from our environment than we do from our text books. The example of other people, the values and tastes of our culture, even the day-to-day events in our lives all have a profound effect on us. By being exposed to the right kinds of influences we develop habits that are eventually internalised into genuine feelings of empathy and goodwill, at which point the virtues 'will by habit and indulgence grow into desires, and to the fruition of the virtuous desires' (Macaulay, 1790: 181).

The importance of environment is especially prominent for children since they have not yet developed the capacity for reason. Any attempt to teach rational principles too early will backfire. The appearance of reason will instead be 'no more than the echo of the public voice'. Instead of thinking for themselves, individuals will adopt 'the most absurd prejudices' with the consequence that 'every part of morals becomes fluctuation; and customs, manners, sentiments change according to the notions of those in power' (Macaulay, 1790: 96). Once again, we should not underestimate the scale of what this means. Macaulay warns us that all our social interactions, including the most innocuous chance encounters, will have some effect on our character and beliefs. 'Every error

thrown out in conversation', she argues, 'every sentiment which does not correspond with the true principles of virtue, is received by the mind, and like a drop of venomous poison will corrupt the mass with which it mingles' (Macaulay, 1790: 103).

There is a lot the government can do to set a society's cultural tone beyond its education policy. Much of Part II of the *Letters on Education* is devoted to this subject. Beyond institutional design and education policy itself, the behaviour of magistrates and officials themselves has a powerful effect. In addition to serving as an example to the public, corrupt behaviour motivates citizens to behave corruptly themselves if only out of rational self-interest and the need to protect themselves. The government can also create a broadly egalitarian society in which public displays of wealth are discouraged. Through penal reforms that would allow former criminals more easily to earn a living and to fit back into society, public unity and cohesion can be improved. Encouraging or permitting barbaric or brutal practices – such as hunting animals or treating them cruelly, abusing slaves or even allowing slaveholding, and publicly executing criminals – also serves to desensitise the population and to inhibit the bonds of sympathy (see especially Macaulay, 1790: 118–123, 176–209). Finally, the state can stimulate the right kinds of cultural pursuits (e.g. encouraging cookery rather than fashion) and the right kinds of fine arts, especially those that underpin a rational religion.

Social and Cultural Domination: The Example of Gender

Macaulay's confidence in these kinds of government-driven policies derives, at least in part, from her commitment to an ideal of reason that can discover immutable moral and practical truths grounded in the nature of things. The considerations by which society should be governed are, in principle, accessible to anyone under the right conditions and given the appropriate training. As social reforms take effect, so the stock of virtue increases in the population, until such point as they have the capacity to regulate their government themselves in the manner described above. Once this happens, there is a free community of independent citizens. Macaulay's confidence sits awkwardly, however, with her description of the actual state of her own society, in which ignorance, corruption and domination were deeply embedded and widespread.

My purpose in this section is to examine the implications for Macaulay's overall model of freedom of her own analysis of gendered relations and the social and political oppression of women. Gender is, of course, a complex and important subject in its own right, and Macaulay's treatment of it is immensely rich, deserving far greater study than I can give it here. My focus is not on the specific issue of gender but rather on how Macaulay uses republican arguments to show how women's unequal social cultural standing systematically undermines virtue in both sexes by setting up a motivational structure that rewards self-interest and encourages false ideas that become unconsciously accepted as obvious truths. So subtle and pernicious are these effects that they can render individuals impervious to the kinds of educational policies aimed at improving the public's ability to reason outlined in the previous section.

If women were to be free, they would have to be fully independent. In Macaulay's (1790: 131–132) time, this was clearly not the case. She puts it in the strongest terms, saying that there is 'a total and absolute exclusion of every political right to the sex in general, [while] married women, whose situation demand a particular indulgence, have hardly a civil right to save them from the grossest injuries'. Married women were represented

entirely by their husbands, who assumed ownership and control of all property and income that a woman might bring to the relationship and who had the capacity to represent their wives in law. Beyond their lack of rights, however, Macaulay goes on immediately to discuss what turns out to be a far deeper and more pervasive barrier to independence, namely the tight set of social expectations and practices that are placed upon women.

In particular, Macaulay singles out the way that women are judged solely on their perceived modesty or chastity. 'There is but one fault' she notes

> which a woman of honour may not commit with impunity; let her only take care that she is not caught in a love intrigue, and she may lie, she may deceive, she may defame, she may ruin her own family with gaming, and the peace of twenty others with her coquetry, and yet, preserve both her reputation and her peace (Macaulay, 1790: 132).

The implications are far reaching and the effect on civic virtue is devastating. Tellingly, it is appearance rather than reality that matters. Women are not judged according to their actual virtue, according to Macaulay, but only according to perceptions along the single, narrow dimension of sexual modesty.[16] The imperative to keep up appearances for a woman is paramount. If a woman loses her reputation, she loses her entire position in society, since without rights of her own a woman is entirely dependent on the patronage of others for her protection. A lost reputation cannot be restored and so the stakes are very high. Since men do not face the same consequences in being discovered, they cannot be relied on to place the same degree of importance in keeping their liaisons secret. It is not just men who pose a threat, however. Other women may stand to benefit from betraying others in order to enhance their own standing. 'The snares' Macaulay (1790) concludes

> that are continually laid for women, by persons who run no risk in compassing their seduction, exposes them to continual danger; whilst the implacability of their own sex, who fear to give up any advantage which a superior prudence, or even its appearances, give them, renders one false step an irretrievable misfortune (Macaulay, 1790: 138).

The result is that women are not motivated to behave with rational virtue. On the contrary, in their dependent state women are compelled to seek to gain whatever control they can over their lives. If men have the economic, legal and political power, there is one area left, Macaulay argues, in which women can exercise control over men and that is with sexual power. This power is real (a 'glorious privilege', 132), but it is illicit and clandestine. Women are not rewarded for acting responsibly or morally, and so just as in classical republican theory slaves are led to control their masters through lies, flattery and manipulation, so women are drawn towards using coquetry and charm. Although women are not to blame for finding themselves in this situation, the effect of starting down this path is to erode women's sensitivity and capacity for rational virtue. First, she says, there is a tendency for non-virtuous behaviour to take root in people's character. 'Lying, flattery, hypocrisy, bribery', Macaulay (1790: 132) observes, 'and a long catalogue of the meanest of the human vices, must all be employed to preserve necessary appearances'. This reduces women's sensitivity to the point where 'the warnings of virtue are no longer felt; the mind becomes corrupted, and lies open to every solicitation which appetite or passion presents'.

One place to start in addressing this issue is by educating women so that they will realise how dangerous and futile this behaviour is. This is indeed where Macaulay starts. At the end of the chapter on *Coquetry*, speaking of women she argues that

> when the sex have been taught wisdom by education, they will be glad to give up indirect influence for rational privileges; and the precarious sovereignty of an hour enjoyed … for those established rights which, independent of accidental circumstances, may afford protection to the whole sex (Macaulay, 1790: 135).

While she may seem at first to place the onus on women and to blame them for their behaviour, this is not Macaulay's intention. In the very next line, which opens a new letter on *Male Rakes*, she emphasises how the 'two sexes are so reciprocally dependant on one another that, till both are reformed, there is no expecting excellence in the other'. The need for education is not one-sided. The dangers for women are so much greater than for men (and so her emphasis on women's education is intended in part for their own protection rather than as criticism). Nevertheless, it is also necessary to 'teach the men not to be any longer dazzled by false charms and unreal beauty' (Macaulay, 1790: 135). Unless men are also educated, Macaulay concludes, all we can do is 'palliate the evil we cannot remedy'.

Education on its own, however, can only have a limited impact. For one thing, by their very nature, romantic relationships stir the emotions and passions. Once 'love creeps into the bosom', we are told, inevitably 'reason is at an end' (Macaulay, 1790: 136). What is required, therefore, is an institutional solution. It is not human sexual attraction that lies at the root of the problem but the fundamental inequality between men and women. While women are wholly dependent on men, they will continue to be coquettes. And while men do not face the same risks in being entangled in a love intrigue, they will continue to be rakes. It is one thing to educate both sexes, but unless they are on an equal social footing their motivation to behave virtuously will not be effective. The surest way to underpin and secure their equality is through civil, political and legal rights. These are the 'rational privileges' that Macaulay believes that women would eventually come to embrace. Only when the conditions necessary for their independence were in place, Macaulay argues, would women be in a position to cultivate and display the appropriate virtue.[17]

Of course, no one can embrace what they do not have. Since women had no rights, these institutional reforms and rational privileges would first have to be won. Since reason represents the only non-arbitrary standard by which we can judge what is in the common good, ultimately lasting freedom can only come through the triumph of rational argument where the most rational case is seen to prevail. This is what education and republican institutions are designed to make possible and to safeguard. For women to become free, they would have to show that this was rational and right. Macaulay is confident that they can, not least because she is strongly committed to the idea of the immutability of moral truth and believes that God has given us the necessary faculties to detect it. Nevertheless, in her analysis of gendered relations in these chapters, she gives us very good reason to treat that conclusion with caution. Even where people strive with good intentions to ground their reforms in immutable principles, she demonstrates that they would still be hindered by false beliefs, unreflective biases and the existing structures of social life that combine to distort people's ability to grasp those principles clearly. It cannot be taken for granted that people can simply break through such a tight and intricate web of background cultural ideas that have been built up over many generations.

Macaulay gives us an insight into just how tenacious and prevalent false cultural beliefs can be when she sets out her case against there being fixed and natural differences in character between the sexes. 'It ought', she argues, 'to be the first care of education to teach virtue on immutable principles, and so avoid that confusion which must arise from

confounding the laws and customs of society with those obligations which are founded on correct principles of equity' (Macaulay, 1790: 125).

Culture, in other words, has the potential to obscure reason if not properly challenged. In building her case that the same standard of virtue applies to all rational beings, male and female alike, Macaulay refutes Rousseau's argument that nature had given men and women fundamentally different but complementary qualities – strength and intellect for men, grace and beauty for women – which together 'made up a moral person of the union of the two sexes' (Macaulay, 1790: 128).[18] Macaulay's substantive arguments are important in their own right. However, my interest here is in what she has to say about why her opponent's position was so appealing. While many contemporary readers would find Macaulay's arguments far more persuasive, historically it was Rousseau's ideas which were far more influential, and which continue to leave their legacy even today. Macaulay has an explanation for this. Take, for example, the way that men and women are judged differently for their chastity. She argues that this attitude derives from a time when women were 'considered the mere property of the men'. That social practice created a widespread belief. That belief shaped wider cultural attitudes. These attitudes remained even when the original practices and beliefs had gone. Women were no longer regarded as 'mere property', Macaulay tells us, but the influence of that earlier belief lingered on in cultural practices that people took for granted (Macaulay, 1790: 138). Part of the reason why such attitudes were so resistant to change is that they suited the 'unruly licentiousness' of men who found themselves easily persuaded to believe against reason what was so convenient.

Macaulay, then, identifies two important themes. First, that our social ideas come with a long history that leave an imprint about which we are often unaware. This may lead people to regard an idea – such as that of women's virtue – not as a contingent notion but as an obvious or natural truth. Second, people will continue to believe a falsehood if it both suits their interests and is made possible 'by mutual support and general opinion' (Macaulay, 1790: 138). The combination of these two themes is very serious for a political theory that relies on transparent and accessible public reason and the appeal to immutable principles in identifying an inclusive and representative common good.

Concluding Remarks: Macaulay and Wollstonecraft

I have argued that Macaulay developed a clear and systematic republican account of social and political freedom as independence. In her model, she identifies the significant principle that republicans must inevitably rely on institutions that are responsive to reasoned argument as their final guarantor of freedom. Any other standard will be contingent, and therefore fall short of the required level of robustness that republicans value. She also makes clear that if this system is to function, there must be a sufficient willingness and capacity within the population to commit themselves to regulating their conduct according to these rational standards. People must understand and accept the importance of the common good, and they must act on this principle, meaning that they must be virtuous. To Macaulay's great credit, she uncovers and articulates a genuine problem not only for the approach she has defended but one which faces republican theory more generally. Working through the specifics of gender, but also identifying a general issue, she shows how systematic patterns of dependence and social inequality combine to create motivational structures that undermine virtuous behaviour and ultimately corrupt the wider culture, thereby further reinforcing social vices and inhibiting reform. A tension therefore arises between Macaulay's confidence in our ability to reason

according to immutable moral truths and the messy facts of culture and structural domination that inhibit that ability.

Macaulay herself does not go further in attempting to resolve this tension but instead falls back on her faith in the power of reason and virtue eventually to win through. Her work was, however, a major influence on Mary Wollstonecraft, who did specifically respond to this challenge. In her review of the *Letters on Education*, and referring to the analysis of the social restrictions on women's freedom given in the previous section, Wollstonecraft (1989: 7.31) concludes that Macaulay's 'observations on this subject might have been carried much farther'. Wollstonecraft (1992: 252) did just that in her later work, especially the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (where she expands on Macaulay's claim that there is 'but one fault which a woman of honour may not commit with impunity') and *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*. I have set out Wollstonecraft's republican framework in detail elsewhere, arguing that it is a significant contribution not just to the history of republican thought but also to contemporary debate (Coffee, 2013, 2014). My intention in these final paragraphs, therefore, is only to show very briefly one way in which Macaulay's influence has been carried forward through Wollstonecraft.

Wollstonecraft works with a very similar basic republican structure to that which I have attributed to Macaulay. She is also committed to a comparable understanding of reason as immutable truth backed up by God's good character, which makes it the ultimate benchmark for regulating freedom.[19] Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft is far more prepared to accept the effects of culture and social structures on impairing people's capacity to reason. 'Men and women', she observes, are inevitably shaped 'in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in', so that, 'in every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it' (Wollstonecraft, 1992: 102). As a consequence, people's ability to reason becomes 'clouded'. 'Men, in general', Wollstonecraft (1992: 91) says, 'employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they cannot trace how, rather than to root them out'.[20] The effect on virtue, and thereby on freedom, is catastrophic. Reasoned argument in pursuit of laws that will uphold freedom and the common good can have very little chance of success in an environment in which 'truth is lost in a mist of words, virtue, in forms and knowledge rendered a sounding nothing, by the specious prejudices that assume its name' (Wollstonecraft, 1992: 92).

Against such a background, Wollstonecraft has very little confidence in policies of reform that are based on a direct appeal to reason, such as programmes of education, until something can first be done to restore the general level of civic virtue. 'It may then fairly be inferred', she says 'that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education' to take one example (Wollstonecraft, 1992: 103). This does not, however, mean that people are mere products of their culture, and she immediately adds that 'whatever effect circumstances have on the abilities, every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason'. Individuals do have the capacity to rise above their social background and to reason clearly. This gives Wollstonecraft hope for a solution. Although there are many reasons why very few people are motivated to act virtuously, at root the problem is cultural. We must first clear away the prejudices and false beliefs that we take for granted (Wollstonecraft, 1992: 221). Since the influence of culture cannot be avoided, Wollstonecraft's answer is to control that influence. By clouding a person's ability to think for themselves, an oppressive culture becomes in effect an arbitrary form of power, no less than an unaccountable law or a master with dominion over us.[21]

If we are to have any hope of becoming free, therefore, we must find a way of constraining culture's arbitrary effects, thereby rendering its social influences non-arbitrary. Attempting to contain something as diffuse as our background social and cultural ideas is,

of course, an enormous undertaking. But one of the conditions of a non-arbitrary power is that it is representative of the interests of all those it affects. This is Wollstonecraft's starting point. Women must be at the forefront of a wholesale social reform that she refers to as a 'revolution in female manners' (Wollstonecraft, 1992: 133, 325). This is not confined simply to women's own behaviour but requires a transformation of gendered attitudes in all areas of social, political and economic life. This revolution must necessarily be led not only by women themselves ('reforming themselves to reform the world'), but by extension it must also include men, as well as members from all other social groups, working collaboratively. Simply giving a voice to the misrepresented, or unrepresented, sections of society does not by itself guarantee that prejudices and false beliefs will be removed, or that they will not be replaced by others. Nevertheless, by doing our best to ensure that all voices are heard, Wollstonecraft believes, we have addressed a major obstacle to achieving social equality and freedom. If the distorting influences that cloud our reason are disarmed, then Macaulay's republican principle that social freedom should be based on rational laws under the supervision of an educated population has a greater chance of being realised.

If part of Macaulay's legacy lies in her influence on Wollstonecraft, this does not diminish the significance of her overall contribution to republican thought. The depth and scope of Macaulay's theoretical writing are unmatched by her male contemporaries who serve as our standard primary republican sources. Her influence in her own day was immense, and there is a great deal that modern republican writers can take from her overall approach. If the problems she identified could not easily be solved by the available republican resources, then this is no small contribution in its own right. I have given here only a snapshot of one part of Macaulay's republicanism. The full riches of her writing for republicans are only just beginning to be rediscovered. My hope is that this work will continue.

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Notes

1 Karen Green's recent work on Macaulay has been exceptional. See, for example, Green (2012, 2014), and Green and Weekes (2013). Other significant recent contributions to Macaulay studies are as follows: Frazer (2011), Gardner (1998), Gunther-Canada (2006), Hill (1992, 1995), Hutton (2009) and Reuter (2007). In positioning Macaulay within eighteenth-century thought, I am in agreement with much of what Green writes. Where my emphasis differs from Green's is that I am concerned here to examine in detail Macaulay's particular articulation of the central republican concept of freedom as independence and its implications for her overall framework. Although I examine Macaulay on her own terms, one of my hopes is that this will be of both interest and use to present-day republican theorists seeking a greater understanding of the historical antecedents of their tradition.

2 For more detailed accounts of independence in the republican tradition, see especially Pettit (1997), Skinner (1998), Coffee (2013) and Halldenius (2015) (although none of these focus on Macaulay).

3 On the term 'feminist republicanism', see Halldenius' excellent book (2015: 4–7). Similarly to Halldenius, I do not suggest that there was any identifiable movement within republicanism that we should call feminist at this time. There were, of course, others writing about the inequality of the sexes who drew at various points on aspects of the broadly republican heritage, and this is an area of growing and promising scholarly attention. These include Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Hester Chapone, as well as Sophie de Grouchy in revolutionary France (see Bergès, 2015). What sets Macaulay apart from these others is her sustained and systematic application of the framework of freedom as independence, and the process of corrupting virtue through dependence, to the question of gender inequality. This was an innovative move which I believe to be still relevant.

4 On Macaulay's influence on Wollstonecraft, see Green (2014).

5 See also *Letters*, 118 where the same pairing is given ('life should be a continued effort to banish our prejudices, and extinguish our vices').

6 While Macaulay's general conception of virtue draws on a broad set of considerations and traditions, my interest here is confined to its specific implications for republican theory. See Green (2012), for a fuller discussion of Macaulay's general conception of virtue.

7 I discuss this idea in greater depth in Coffee (2016: 187–192).

8 'What fetters', she asks, 'can bind so strongly, or so fatally, as those which are fastened on the mind?' (Macaulay, 1790: 12). She goes on to say that where prejudice and opinion rather than reason form the basis of our laws and our actions, man becomes 'the slave of custom and of precept' (Macaulay, 1790: 169).

9 God's counsels are immutable and reliable because they are grounded in the 'principle of reasoning' through which his infinite intelligence and wisdom always perceives what is for the best (Macaulay, 1767: 287). Human agents, in turn, act virtuously where their minds and affections have come to the point that they understand their rational interests to be centred in conforming to those standards (Macaulay, 1767: 296).

10 In the third edition of the *History*, the phrase 'blasted by the influence of vice' in the passage quoted above from p. *v* is replaced by 'extinguished by the sordid allurements of private interest'.

11 This thought is not unique to her. Machiavelli (1983: 105) gives the example of Lycurgus, the Spartan lawgiver.

12 There have been, broadly, two opposing positions for resolving this. One model follows the example of the Roman Republic in which its founder, Brutus, held the ring until the Roman people had acquired the necessary civic virtues and political maturity to manage their freedom (Livy, 1960: Book II). The other is for the people themselves to rise up and reform themselves. This was what Wollstonecraft advocated through her 'revolution in female manners' (Coffee, 2013).

13 'There is not a virtue or a vice that belongs to humanity, which we do not make ourselves; and if their qualities should be hostile to our happiness, we may ascribe their malignancy to human agency' (Macaulay, 1790: 7), and again, 'the character of our species is formed from the influence of education … [people's] vices and virtues differ in a great measure from each other, according to the different state in which they have been educated' (Macaulay, 1790: 53).

14 'For though the languages may be very well taught in large schools', Macaulay (1790: 13) argues, 'yet morals must necessarily be totally neglected'. Large schools can be efficient at imparting knowledge, but their scale prevents them from providing the personal examples of benevolence that young children, who have not yet reached the age of reason, require if they are to become virtuous. On this point, Macaulay's views are close to Rousseau's whose work she follows, for example, in letters XIII and XIV.

15 Putting it more succinctly, 'example is better than precept' (Macaulay, 1790: 94).

16 Macaulay is not objecting to the idea that chastity and modesty can be part of virtue. Her criticism here is, first, to the way that women are judged very differently from men, and second, to the 'false notion of beauty and delicacy' that underpins it (Macaulay, 1790: 129). Regarding the moral value of sexual restraint, she maintains that anyone, 'understanding the principles of true religion and morality, will regard chastity and truth as indispensable qualities in virtuous characters of either sex' (Macaulay, 1790: 139).

17 It is a central pillar of republican theory that virtue cannot be expected from dependent individuals. They do not have the luxury to act according to conscience but must first consider their own self-preservation. As Wollstonecraft (1992: 135) was later to ask, also of women, 'why do they expect virtue from a slave, from a being whom the constitution of civil society has rendered weak, if not vicious?'.

18 See *Emile*, Book V, 384–400.

19 To submit to reason, Wollstonecraft says: 'is to submit to the nature of things, and to that God, who formed them so, to promote our real interest', adding that 'it is the right use of reason alone which makes us independent of everything – excepting the unclouded reason – 'whose service is perfect freedom' (1992: 230, 277).

20 So powerful is this effect, she argues, that even 'the page of genius has always been blurred by the prejudices of the age' (Wollstonecraft (1992: 129)).
21 The superficial education that so many have 'received, makes them all their lives, the slaves of prejudices' (Wollstonecraft (1992: 219)).

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