An Unrecorded 1785 Discourse by Catharine Macaulay

Abstract: This short communication examines a previously overlooked discourse entitled ‘A Quaker’s Sermon’, which was published in the September 1785 issue of the *European Magazine*, purportedly by Catharine Macaulay, the celebrated historian, philosopher, and republican writer. It provides some reasons in support of the *European Magazine*’s attribution of the discourse to Macaulay and explicates the work’s connections to her wider social thought. It also suggests that Macaulay might have published the discourse to engage in a rhetorical exercise that was prohibited by most eighteenth-century religious denominations other than the Quakers: writing a sermon as a woman.

Keywords: Catharine Macaulay, Quakers, periodical literature, wealth, religion

In September 1785, the *European Magazine* published ‘A Quaker’s Sermon’. This short discourse was purportedly a ‘Never before published’ work by ‘Mrs. Catharine Macaulay’, the celebrated historian, philosopher, and republican writer.[1] Despite the great revival of interest in Macaulay’s life and writings in the last thirty years,[2] there does not appear to have been any modern discussion of this text. To address this lacuna, this communication analyses the content of the ‘Quaker’s Sermon’, provides some reasons in support of the *European Magazine*’s attribution of the discourse to Macaulay, and explicates the work’s connections to her wider social thought. It concludes by suggesting that Macaulay might have published the discourse in order to engage in a rhetorical exercise that was prohibited by most eighteenth-century religious denominations other than the Quakers: writing a sermon as a woman. The ‘Quaker’s Sermon’ thus offers further insight into Macaulay’s efforts to overcome the gendered constraints on her literary activities.

The ‘Quaker’s Sermon’ made only superficial efforts to reproduce the rhetorical approaches and theological ideas of the Quakers themselves. Quaker meetings were typically convened in silence as the congregation waited for the Holy Spirit to move them, unless a member of the congregation, whether a man or a woman, was driven by that same spirit to speak. Although such sermons often made frequent references to Scripture, they were not meant to be, in contrast to Anglican and Dissenting sermons, pre-prepared reflections upon a specific Scriptural text.[3] The ‘Quaker’s Sermon’, however, was prefaced with a quotation from Matthew 19:24: ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God’.[4] The discourse focused on analysing the implications of that Scriptural passage. Such Scriptural prefaces were uncommon in Quaker sermons, though they occasionally appeared in printed versions.[5]

The ‘Quaker’s Sermon’ itself was much shorter than almost all Quaker sermons. Despite their impromptu nature, most of the Quaker sermons available in print were considerably longer than five pages. They were thus much shorter than Anglican sermons but longer than the ‘Quaker’s Sermon’, which was constituted by four paragraphs that covered two-thirds of a page of the *European Magazine*. The concision of the discourse might have reflected an effort to capture the spontaneous nature of the sermons it was emulating and was suggestive of a brief, emotive intervention. Yet, this appears to have been more of a framing device than a serious attempt to appropriate this aspect of Quaker sermons.

The ‘Quaker’s Sermon’ was also clearly presenting Macaulyan moral ideas, rather than the positions of the Quakers themselves. The author immediately repudiated the well-established Quaker position that superfluous goods are contrary to the frugal simplicity enjoined by God.[6] The first sentence of the ‘Quaker’s Sermon’ declared that such a condemnation of riches in general would be ‘incompatible to natural right and human safety’. Instead of following the literal meaning of the Scriptural declaration in the Gospel of Matthew, ‘the figurative language of Scripture must be explained by enlightened reason, when it runs quite counter to the current of human affairs’. The ‘Quaker’s Sermon’, therefore, did not critique ‘the simple possession of riches’, but only repudiated ‘their abuse’. The discourse also alluded to the social consequences of great wealth, remarking that the possession of riches ‘in an immoderate degree is a great evil in a state of society’.[7]

As part of this wider argument, the second paragraph of the discourse propounded the view of ‘an eminent moral writer’ that human nature ‘appears a very deformed or very beautiful object, according to the different lights in which it is viewed.’ On the one hand, we are ashamed to see humanity engage in ‘wicked designs, tearing one another to pieces by open violence, or undermining each other by secret treachery'. On the other hand, we admire those who are 'full of a generous regard for the public prosperity, compassionating each others' distresses, and relieving each others' wants'.[8] Although the name of this ethical writer was not mentioned, the paragraph closely paraphrased a passage from the 23 November 1711 issue of the *Spectator* by the essayist Sir Richard Steele—an allusion that would have been very unusual in genuine Quaker sermons, which tended to focus on Scripture.[9]

The 'Quaker's Sermon' went on to portray the way that riches undermine the nobler aspects of human nature as described by Steele. It asserted that the possession of riches 'has always a tendency to corrupt those principles of piety, justice, and benevolence, which alone give a superiority to the human over the brute creation.' Riches inflame 'the passions of pride, avarice, and corrupt selfishness' as well as affording 'the means to pamper the lusts of sense' and to 'gratify the extravagance of a vain imagination'. Wealth often creates 'a supercilious contempt for those of God's creatures whom Fortune has denied to favour.' The 'Quaker's Sermon' was even more forceful in its condemnation of the 'abuse of riches'. The misuse of wealth was 'opposite to the plain dictates of gospel morality' and 'incompatible with the benign, the humble spirit of Christianity'. The corrupting effects of riches harden the hearts of the wealthy, rendering 'the cries of the orphan unavailing, and the widow's tears of none effect.'[10]

The final sentence of the discourse delineated the social consequences of immoderate wealth, which had been alluded to in the first paragraph. It declaimed that the abuse of riches conspires to add: 'contempt to the evils of poverty, render wretchedness more wretched; exclude the public cause from private care; produce fraud and treachery, with all the vices of insolence and servility; produce tyranny, oppression, and slavery'. The concluding reflection of the 'Quaker's Sermon' was that such social consequences are the reason why it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. In this way, the Scriptural injunction was given a forceful political implication: the morally corrupting effects of riches caused social oppression, and both forms of wickedness were contrary to salvation.[11]

The 'Quaker's Sermon' did adopt some rhetorical devices from Quaker sermons. As with many such sermons, the discourse began with a reference to 'my friends' and repeated the phrase in the third and fourth paragraph.[12] The sermon also alluded to 'our

Society of Texts' if only to repudiate the Quakers who took Scripture in a 'literal sense'.[13] It is also possible that some of the rhetorical techniques used in this discourse might have been constructed to echo Quaker productions but the language was not sufficiently distinctive to be incompatible with the theological framework of Anglican sermons. Metaphors of light were prominent in Quaker preaching and the 'Quaker's Sermon' emphasised the differences of human nature 'according to the different lights in which it is viewed'.[14] Quaker sermons often emphasised humility of spirit and following the plain dictates of the Gospel.[15] The 'Quaker's Sermon' contrasted 'abuse of riches' with the 'plain dictates of gospel morality' and 'the humble spirit of Christianity.' These were not distinctively Quaker tropes, but the author was evidently adopting the forceful and passionate language of eighteenth-century British sermon culture more generally. In keeping with this rhetorical approach, the 'Quaker's Sermon' displayed an overriding concern that one should not be barred from 'entrance into the kingdom of God'.[16] Using a traditionally male literary activity to convey these moral ideas appears to have had some success because the 'Quaker's Sermon' was republished only a month later in the *Gentleman's and London Magazine* for October 1785.[17]

There are strong reasons to accept the *European Magazine*'s attribution of the 'Quaker's Sermon' to Catharine Macaulay. For though periodicals occasionally misattributed essays to famous authors, such errors, whether intentional or not, tended to occur posthumously.[18] Macaulay, however, was not only alive in 1785, but she also remained an active writer who probably would have intervened to quash a false attribution. Such a public controversy would have been damaging to the reputation of the *European Magazine* and to the organisation that produced the periodical: the respectable Philological Society of London. That Macaulay wrote the 'Quaker's Sermon' is further supported by the fact that the *European Magazine* published several of her letters. Before the publication of the 'Quaker's Sermon', the November 1783 issue had printed Macaulay's correspondence with David Hume. It had also published an 'Account of the Life and Writings of Mrs. Catharine Macaulay', which ascribed the apparent decline of her reputation to her imprudent personal life but commented that the intellectual rigour of her writings remained undiminished.[19] The issues of the *European Magazine* for May and June 1788, moreover, printed several letters between Macaulay and the historian William Harris.[20] Clearly, the *European Magazine* was able to acquire unpublished writings by Macaulay. As such, it appears probable that the periodical would have been able to publish an authentic discourse of Macaulay's in the form of the 'Quaker's Sermon'.

The conceptual and linguistic content of the 'Quaker's Sermon' was also consistent with Macaulay's wider writings. Only two years before the publication of that discourse, Macaulay had in *A Treatise on the Immutability of Moral Truth* (1783) lamented that England's morals had been depraved by: 'The insolence which too commonly attends success; the prodigality and dissipation which accompany riches'.[21] The language of this passage prefigured the 'Quaker's Sermon', which also referred to 'the vices of insolence and servility' as consequences of riches.[22] Some other linguistic features of the *Immutability of Moral Truth* were reflected in the 'Quaker's Sermon'. The discourse had exalted rational morality as the reason for humanity's superiority over 'brute creation'.[23] In the *Immutability of Moral Truth*, Macaulay similarly deployed the phrase 'brute creation' on at least four different occasions and used it in arguments that distinguished humanity from animals on the basis of their rationality and morality.[24] Both the *Immutability of Moral Truth* and the 'Quaker's Sermon' appealed to 'enlightened reason'.[25]

These textual and philosophical similarities were even more strongly reflected in the *Letters on Education* (1790), which expanded and developed the arguments of her *Immutability of Moral Truth*. This work echoed her earlier condemnations of great wealth. She critiqued excessive wealth and the desire for riches as generating 'atrocious cruelties', undermining the virtue of the Roman republic, and stimulating vain pridefulness. As with the *Immutability of Moral Truth*, the *Letters on Education* shared some linguistic features with the 'Quaker's Sermon'. She frequently compared the nature of 'brute creation' with rational and moral humans and appealed to 'enlightened reason'. The 'Quaker's Sermon' had declared that riches inured one against the cries of the orphan and the widow. Macaulay's *Letters on Education* reproduced this appeal to the tears of the suffering in a critique of the horrors of war. She asked: 'how many mental sufferings have not those scourges of humanity, the sword and the musquet, with all the bloody artillery of war, occasioned in the breast of the parent, the child, the widow, the orphan, and in all those several relations which form the bands of social life?'[26] These linguistic and conceptual similarities between the 'Quaker's Sermon' and Macaulay's other writings not only provide further evidence that she was the author of the discourse but the attribution of the discourse to her reveals that her concern about the corrupting influence of wealth endured throughout the 1780s.

Macaulay's choice to convey her critique of immoderate wealth through the medium of a 'Quaker's Sermon' is particularly interesting. Her decision to write such a discourse may have been indebted to her close connections to Quakers, such as Edmund Rudd, who acted as Macaulay's agent, and Mary Knowles, who corresponded with Macaulay over the political activities of the Quakers.[27] The fact that Macaulay had sufficient knowledge to appropriate *some* tropes from such sermons, such as the repeated refrain of 'my friends', suggests a reasonable understanding of such works. The notoriety of the Quakers' rejection of superfluous wealth also might have been amongst the reasons why Macaulay chose to frame the reflection as a discourse from that religious group. Nevertheless, she explicitly refused to defend the theological position of the Quakers. What seems to have been more significant than Quaker doctrine, therefore, was the fact that the Society of Friends allowed women to preach.[28] By writing a Quaker sermon, Macaulay carved out a way for her to perform a rhetorical endeavour that she would have traditionally been barred from participating in. As has been noted above, the 'Quaker's Sermon' did share several rhetorical features with eighteenth-century sermons of the Quakers and other denominations. This discourse was the only one of Macaulay's works in which she focused on explicating the meaning of a specific passage of Scripture. It also seems to have allowed her to adopt a declamatory style that contrasted with the elegant politeness of her famous *History of England* (1763–83).[29]

Macaulay indeed was not the first non-Quaker woman to write sermons in eighteenth-century England. In 1774, Mary Deverell of Gloucestershire had published some *Sermons on Following Subjects*, which were constructed as if they were Anglican sermons explaining particular passages of Scripture. Although Deverell claimed that she had only kept the title because the work had been advertised as such to her subscribers, the individual discourses were structured as sermons, so she must have always intended to write in this manner. After all, she did not refrain from emphasizing the possible beneficial effects of her 'serious and religious contemplations'.[30] When she visited London, she found the clergy predictably dismayed at her usurpation of their patriarchal prerogatives: 'the title of *Sermons*, from a woman, startles them! and must not be encouraged in our sex: And even these persons of candour will ask me, where I took my degrees?' She responded archly: 'I can only answer, from the *Bible*; and the sacred learning that imparts, is not confined to sex or colleges.'[31] Macaulay's works overflowed with serious religious reflections, so she might, like Devereux, have wished to break into what was for non-Quakers a separate male sphere of sacred learning and preaching. By writing a consciously artificial 'Quaker's Sermon' for a group that explicitly allowed women to preach, she was able to participate in this intellectual activity without the potentially controversial implication that she was attempting to usurp the prerogatives of the Anglican clergy. The result was a victory over the gendered constraints upon her literary expression.

[1] *The European Magazine, and London Review; Containing the Literature, History, Politics, Arts, Manners and Amusements of the Age*, 86 vols. (London: John Fielding, John Debrett, and John Sewell, 1782–1826), 8:169.

[2] For instance, see: Bridget Hill, *The Republican Virago: The Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay, Historian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Bridget Hill and Christopher Hill, 'Catharine Macaulay's *History* and her Catalogue of Tracts', *The Seventeenth Century*, 8, no. 2 (1993): 269–285; Carla H. Hay, 'Catharine Macaulay and the American Revolution', *The Historian*, 56, no. 2 (1994): 301–16; Bridget Hill, 'The Links between Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay: New Evidence', *Women's History Review*, 4, no. 2 (1995): 177–92; Devoney Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 134–66; Philip Hicks, 'Catharine Macaulay's Civil War: Gender, History, and Republicanism in Georgian Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 41, no. 2 (2002): 170–99; Sarah Hutton, 'Liberty, Equality and God: The Religious Roots of Catharine Macaulay's Feminism', in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 538–550; Kate Davies, *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Karen O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 152–72; Catharine Macaulay, *The Correspondence of Catharine Macaulay*, ed. Karen Green (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020); Karen Green, *Catharine Macaulay's Republican Enlightenment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); Catharine Macaulay, *Political Writings*, ed. Max Skjönsberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[3] Michael P. Graves, 'Ministry and Preaching', in *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, ed. Stephen W. Angell and Ben P. Dandelion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 277–91, at 277.

[4] *The European Magazine*, 8:169.

[5] Most of the sermons in the following compilation did not use such prefaces: *The Concurrence and Unanimity; of the People Called Quakers* (London: J. Sowle, 1711).

[6] Martine E. Ross Eiler, 'Luxury, Capitalism, and the Quaker Reformation, 1737–1798', *Quaker History*, 97, no. 1 (2008): 11–31, at 12–14.

[7] *The European Magazine*, 8:169.

[8] Ibid., 8:169.

[9] Donald F. Bond, ed., *The Spectator*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2:393–5 (no. 230).

[10] *The European Magazine*, 8:169.

[11] Ibid., 8:169.

[12] *The European Magazine*, 8:169; *Concurrence and Unanimity*, 46, 48, 50.

[13] *The European Magazine*, 8:169.

[14] Graves, 'Ministry and Preaching', 280; *The European Magazine*, 8:169.

[15] See, for instance, *Concurrence and Unanimity*, 64, 138–9.

[16] *The European Magazine*, 8:169.

[17] *The Gentleman's and London Magazine; or Monthly Chronologer*, 55 vols. (London, 1785), 55:532.

[18] For instance, the Anglican clergyman William Dodd published the Platonist philosopher Ralph Cudworth's manuscripts as John Locke's writings: John Arthur Passmore, *Ralph Cudworth: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 107–113. However, this might in part have been a genuine error about the author of the manuscripts, rather than an attempt to mislead readers.

[19] *The European Magazine*, 4:330–34.

[20] Ibid., 13:317–18, 406–9.

[21] Catharine Macaulay, *A Treatise on the Immutability of Moral Truth. With Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (London: C. Dilly, G. Robinson, T. Cadell, T. Lewis, J. Walter, and R. Faulder, 1783), 14–15.

[22] *The European Magazine*, 8:169.

[23] Ibid., 8:169.

[24] Macaulay, *Immutability of Moral Truth*, 36, 53, 98, 291.

[25] Macaulay, *Immutability of Moral Truth*, 325; *The European Magazine*, 8:169.

[26] Catharine Macaulay, *Letters on Education* (London: C. Dilly, 1790), 190, 253–5, 260, 305–6, 3, 6, 92, 268, 430, 188, 194, 273, 453, 389.

[27] Macaulay, *Correspondence*, 227, 189–931.

[28] For further discussion of the eighteenth-century debate over women preaching in Quaker meetings see: Naomi Pullin, 'The Quaker Reception of John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Debate over Women's Preaching', *The English Historical Review*, 139, no. 597 (2024): 426–54.

[29] Catharine Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James I. to that of the Brunswick Line*, 8 vols. (London: J. Nourse, R. and J. Dodsley, and W. Johnston, 1763–83), 1:279–81.

[30] Mary Deverell, *Sermons on the Following Subjects* (Bristol: S. Farley, B. Becket, J. Bence, G. Harris, 1774), 130–48, i–x, vi.

[31] Mary Deverell, *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse, Mostly Written in the Epistolary Style*, 2 vols. (London: J. Rivington, 1781), 1:110.

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