CATHARINE MACAULAY’S 
WANING LAURELS

Every age has its particular character, Hortensia. Love, chivalry, and romance, are the leading features of one; gravity, hypocrisy, and a puritanical preciseness, of another; but what shall we say of the times in which we live, where the motley garb of folly confounds by its variety, and where show and ornament in all cases, take the lead of solid excellence.

—Catharine Macaulay, Letters on Education (1790)

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) generously praises the late Catharine Macaulay Graham (1731–91). Wollstonecraft calls Macaulay the woman of the greatest abilities ever produced by Great Britain and then expresses her grief: “When I first thought of writing these strictures I anticipated Mrs. Macaulay’s approbation, with a little of the sanguine ardour, which it has been the business of my life to depress; but soon heard with the sickly qualm of disappointed hope; and the still seriousness of regret—that she was no more!” Angry that there has not been “sufficient respect . . . paid to her memory,” Wollstonecraft expresses confidence that where Macaulay is concerned, “posterity . . . will be more just” (105). Recent critics have made much of Wollstonecraft’s prediction for Macaulay’s reputation, particularly because posterity has for so long been unjust.2

In this chapter, I look at an unenthusiastic review of Macaulay’s last published full-length work, *Letters on Education* (1790)—and her enraged unpublished response to it—for what it can tell us about the conditions facing women writers who put forward new work in late life. Macaulay’s unpublished response shows how clearly she understood what it meant to be devalued as an aging woman writer and how she linked her own aging to her
history making. In an angry letter to the *Monthly Review*, Macaulay seems to be fighting for her earthly afterlife, having witnessed her stature as an author crumbling. She redeployed the rhetoric of female old age and used her characteristic political verve to defy the mistreatment she believed she was facing. Her battle, as we now know, was not won. Turning in the latter part of the chapter to the unflattering and even preposterous stories that circulated about her after her death, I show how Macaulay successfully anticipated, but unsuccessfully tried to stave off, the rancor and dismissal that would mar her posthumous reputation. Macaulay apparently saw her aging body mirroring her allegedly outmoded history, as she fought in the final year of her life to recapture the respect she had once enjoyed.

Wollstonecraft, though she also faced virulent treatment, has found justice from posterity. Her complete works were published a decade ago, and it is difficult to open any anthology or encyclopedia of the period without locating extended reference to her life and writings. Macaulay’s re-emergence has been more belated, even though the two women had much in common. Both espoused radical politics, both successively published angry responses to Edmund Burke and treatises considering women’s education, and both led lives that engendered public scandal. Wollstonecraft’s life is famously filled with daring, disastrous, and heroic events, tragically cut short. Macaulay’s, which also had its share of notoriety, seems in comparison more stable and less pitiful, as she lived much longer, though just to the cusp of what was then considered old age. Yet Macaulay began to experience what it was like to be received as an aging woman writer, a phenomenon markedly different from the frisson of celebrity and infamy she had experienced as the young “English Clio.”

Early in her career as a writer, Macaulay began a history of England that would reach more than 3,500 pages—an impressive accomplishment. Macaulay herself reached 60 years of age, dying on 22 June 1791 after “a long and very painful illness.” She was frequently in poor health, though apparently never poor. Her first marriage was seemingly happy, and her husband supported her writing. Some years after his death, she surrounded herself with a band of toadies whose fulsome actions on her behalf made her look foolish in turn. Among this group, she met her second husband, defying convention and expectations to remarry at 47, an age that the *Times* already considered her “decline of life.” Her choice was William Graham, a 21-year-old surgeon’s mate and younger brother of her quack doctor. Despite the union’s occasioning vengeful public ridicule, it was, by all indications, a good match. Still, it has proved difficult for critics to package Macaulay’s choices as heroic, even where her politics are
so considered. Her march toward death was, if anything, the uneventful end to what some would have us believe was a farcical middle age.

It may be that Macaulay’s re-emergence to critical acclaim has been slower than Wollstonecraft’s because the former’s life is less easily romanticized. It is also possible that Macaulay has not fared as well because she wrote in genres that have traveled poorly across the centuries. Macaulay “lacked but one claim to a central position” in the period, according to Margaret Kirkham: “she was not a novelist.” Nor was she a poet. Her historiography has rarely been lauded for its literary merit or its formal innovation. Additionally, she did not survive into the 1790s. Had she lived through more of that decade, perhaps her political views—though they would have brought her a great deal of trouble—might also have placed her in circles now celebrated and scrutinized by scholars of British Romanticism. She may well have been able to create and assume the role of wise granddame. Macaulay certainly functioned as a kind of foremother for Wollstonecraft, as we have seen.

Several important essays have been published considering the immense influence of Macaulay on Wollstonecraft, most of which examine their respective positions on women’s rights. The emergence of two formerly unknown letters between Wollstonecraft and Macaulay definitively establishes what many suspected—that the two women were in contact. Wollstonecraft also favorably reviewed Letters on Education. These connections themselves suggest Macaulay’s importance to the world of letters in her later years. But as new evidence illustrates, at the end of her life, Macaulay felt (or believed others perceived) that her authorial powers were slipping away; she despaired of her ability to maintain an audience. Her response was characteristic: defiant self-defense, rather than passive acceptance. Macaulay’s late writings, and her rejoinder to their reception, do not demonstrate the “calm and gentle” old age that Victorian critic Jerom Murch believed characterized the era’s elderly women writers. Indeed, the aged Macaulay was, as we now know, quite the opposite—strident and forceful—on at least one notable occasion.

Gathering materials to make sense of Macaulay’s later life and writings has, until recently, been quite difficult. When Bridget Hill published the first biography of Macaulay, The Republican Virago (1992), she failed to locate family papers, speculating that any surviving documents were burned in an estate fire in the early twentieth century. She finds that Macaulay’s “movements in the last ten years [of her life] are obscure” (“Links” 178). Three years after the biography appeared, Hill describes being “appalled” to learn that a number of Macaulay-related documents had recently been sold at auction.
Subsequently, the Gilder Lehrman Collection advertised that it acquired the Catharine Macaulay Papers, consisting of some 190 pieces, including letters to and from John Adams, Horace Walpole, and Mercy Otis Warren, as well as dozens of letters to and from Macaulay’s second husband and her only daughter, Catherine. These documents put us in a much better position to understand Macaulay’s concerns and challenges during the last years of her life, so that her old age need no longer be shadowed in obscurity.

Macaulay’s final publications were *Letters on Education* (1790) and *Observations on the Reflections of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, on the Revolution in France* (1790). She may have planned “to resume . . . on a political subject,” but Burke’s *Reflections* “persuaded her to devote all her dwindling energies to a spirited reply” (Hill, *Republican* 128–29). *Observations on the Reflections* takes its cue from other English responses to the French Revolution, but it can also be seen as a continuation of Macaulay’s earlier work. In it, as in her other texts, she argues that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was incomplete and warns against the dangers of the national debt (e.g., “the larger the debt, the greater will be the degree of evil” [33]). Her primary aim is to refute Burke and to insist that one cannot rush to judgment about the French Revolution. She argues that history is not relevant as an interpretive guide in the case of the current uprising in France: “We cannot venture to establish an opinion on the state of a country not yet recovered from the convulsive struggles which every important revolution must occasion. We can gain no light from history; for history furnishes no example of any government in a large empire, which, in the strictest sense of the word, has secured to the citizen the full enjoyment of his rights” (*Observations* 42). Despite identifying this lack of historical precedent from which to judge the Revolution, Macaulay has hope for the future of France. In a darker moment, she predicts that if municipalities abuse their power, it will lead to “utter destruction,” and if the army gains control, its members will unwittingly become enslaved themselves (42, 43). She concludes that, regardless of what the French do, the only legitimate government is in “the will of the people” (45).

When examining the final stages of Macaulay’s authorial career, however, the *Letters on Education* is arguably the more important text. As Jonathan Wordsworth has claimed, it is “the last of [Macaulay’s] considered writings on which she hoped that her reputation would be based” (49). Her obituary in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* wrongly lists *Letters on Education* as her “last publication.” The *Letters on Education* is a bizarre and fascinating book, divided into three parts of twenty-five, thirteen, and thirty-eight letters on diverse
More successfully executed than her previous epistolary work, *History of England from the Revolution to the Present Time, in a Series of Letters to a Friend* (1778), the *Letters on Education* uses a fictional correspondent, Hortensia, as its addressee. The text employs a conventional framework, but it is jarringly disconnected and seems rushed throughout its nearly 500 pages. *Letters on Education* ranges far beyond its titular subject to offer a patchy how-to guide for contemporary life.

Macaulay’s book features a greater number of personal asides than is typical of her earlier works. When discussing the care of infants, she digresses to include her philosophy of talking about oneself:

> I would rather have had an American savage for my nurse, than those to whose care my infancy was committed. Many a time has my pen been wrested from my hand by the tyranny of a head-ach; many a time have I deplored the influence of early habits; perceived mistakes which it was impossible for me to remedy, and lamented infirmities acquired before I enjoyed the privilege of a voluntary agency. But away with this egotism! one can never have a worse subject to discuss than dear self, for we are ever more interested in it than the person to whom we address our discourse; and I have often laughed at the ridiculous situation which I have observed myself and others to be in, when relating with a passionate vehemence a succession of afflicting evils to hearers, who could hardly force such a seeming attention as is consistent with common politeness. So much more weight have the slightest circumstances which concern ourselves, than the most important ones which can effect others; that I would advise the person who seeks for pity and relief from the sympathy of friends, to be very brief in his tale of woe; to deal in generals as to himself, and to dwell on those particulars in which his hearer has a personal concern. (30)

Macaulay presents this advice to keep mum about one’s own troubles as something learned from previous experience, but she rarely belabors her own stories in her writings. Her surviving correspondence presents occasional tales of personal woe (primarily about her health), but it is more often politically focused. Her published writings delve into first-person material even more rarely. It took a great deal, apparently, to rouse Macaulay to righteous anger and passion in writing of her personal affairs, though she freely expresses such emotion in her political writings.

Like other epistolary books on conduct and philosophy, *Letters on Education* considers education, childrearing, happiness, religion, and a host of virtues and vices. Her book, however, is—as she recognizes—“novel” in its argu-
ments (iii). She writes that “the organs of sense are the same in both sexes” and titles this argument with Rousseau, “No characteristic Difference in Sex” (203). Her innovations are even more notable on questions of everyday habits. Macaulay recommends limiting animal products in one’s diet (38), though feeding infants pure gravy of meat (32). Children should be allowed to go to church only occasionally to “reward [them] for well doing” (96). As an alternative, their Sundays should be spent doing needlework and reading in the morning and listening to music in the afternoon (95). She would keep the Bible out of the hands of the young until they are 21, because introducing it too early produces infidels and fanatics (91–92, 155–58). She touts the merits of needlework for girls (65) and encourages handicrafts as hobbies for boys (65), but she would educate them together. She favors small class sizes (20). She repeatedly discusses ways to inculcate kindness to animals (120–25). She believes that children should go barefoot until the age of six (43) and that public nurseries should be provided for infants of all ranks, paid for by graduated taxes (17).

Her rambling practical idealism is coupled with a grave concern for present corrupting tendencies. She notes that though she engages in a “vindication of female nature,” she is not an “apologist” for the “conduct of women” (214). She disparages coquetry but concludes that men abuse power more often than women (215). She criticizes the use of cosmetics among old women (41). She expresses concern throughout the Letters on Education that religious principles are increasingly being discarded (321). As a result, she is prone to make suggestions that limit temptation, such as the proposal that theatrical performances be held only in the morning in order to prevent the scenes of “license and debauchery, which regularly follow the close of those entertainments” (314). She would have members of the gentry trade in the time and expense spent on tours of the Continent for acts of domestic charity (291).

She also uses the Letters as a platform to respond to past criticisms. She responds to James Boswell’s anecdote about her argument with Samuel Johnson over political distinctions, which had implied that she was a hypocrite. In her three-page rebuttal, she reports that Johnson questioned her, “Why . . . do you not ask your servant to sit down with us, instead of suffering him to wait?” (167). She reports—as Boswell does not—that she replied to Johnson, “You seem to mistake the whole bent of my reasoning; I was not arguing against that inequality of property which must more or less take place in all societies, and which actually occasions the difference that now exists between me and
my servant; I was speaking only of political distinctions: a difference which actually does not exist between us, for I know of no distinctions of that kind which any of the commoners of England possess. Was my servant obliged to serve me without a pecuniary consideration, by virtue of any political privilege annexed to my station, there would be some propriety in your remark” (168). Macaulay ostensibly presents this story to demonstrate the evils of sophistry and to show that “Doctor Johnson would argue loosely and inaccurately when he thought he had a feeble antagonist; and that victory, not truth, was too often the thing sought after.” She also takes pains to establish that “the opposition of opinion between us passed off with great good humour on both sides.” Macaulay attempts to right the record about this personal interaction, but it is, of course, Boswell’s version that continues to be repeated.

Not all of *Letters on Education* was new work. The last third of the text recasts her earlier *Treatise on the Immutability of Moral Truth* (1783), which deals with religious and metaphysical subjects. Macaulay acknowledges the use of this material in her preface to the *Letters*, though she maintains that she “has endeavored to correct the faults” that writer Samuel Badcock (1747–88) pointed to in his private, halfheartedly complimentary, and posthumously published letter on her work (viii). Badcock wrote to a friend that Macaulay’s work was good, especially since ladies are not adapted to abstract speculations. By correcting the “faults” noticed by Badcock, and in asides such as the one on Boswell’s Johnson, Macaulay seems to be trying to pave the way for the book’s (and her own) favorable reception. Despite her efforts, if they were such, the *Letters on Education* received mixed notice.

The *Analytical Review*, in its detailed essay by Wollstonecraft, was largely positive. Wollstonecraft occasionally disagreed with Macaulay, notably on the ease with which people of fortune could find suitable caretakers for their children and on the number of literary works the young could reasonably be expected to read (243, 245). But Wollstonecraft warmly recommends the work to parents and finds that it “adds new lustre to Mrs. M’s character as an historian and a moralist” (254). The review concludes by stating that the book “displays a degree of sound reason and profound thought which either through defective organs, or a mistaken education, seldom appears in female productions.” In April 1791, the *European Magazine* reviewed *Letters on Education*, primarily quoting from and summarizing its contents. The review was continued in the July issue, dated some weeks after Macaulay’s death. Praise for the book did not appear until the continuation of the re-
view. There, *Letters on Education* is called “elegant and instructive,” though the reviewer laments that “limits” prevent “particularising the beauties it contains” (48).

Macaulay, perhaps unaware of the positive assessment forthcoming in the *European Magazine*, was apparently shocked by the treatment she received elsewhere. The public soon learned of Macaulay’s displeasure with the *Monthly Review*. Several months after its review of *Letters on Education* appeared, a notice was published in the correspondence section of the periodical. Editor Ralph Griffiths writes, “We are sorry to learn, by an angry, and rather impolite, letter from Mrs. Macaulay Graham, that this lady is dissatisfied with our criticism on her ‘Letters on Education.’”24 Griffiths reports that “after the fullest and most deliberate consideration, we expressed our unbiassed sentiments . . . on revisal, we find nothing to retract” (119). His response is both mocking and defensive:

If we pointed out some particulars in the work, which did not accord with our judgment;—if we could not agree with this ingenious speculator, concerning the method of treating infants, the utility of amusing modes of instruction, the propriety of her plan of study, the expediency of transferring theatrical entertainments from the evening to the morning, and some other subjects;—why should a mere difference in opinion be treated as a ground of offence? In expressing our disapprobation . . . we only hazarded an opinion contrary to that of the author. We ventured, indeed, to question the advantage of keeping young persons ignorant of the scriptures, during the period when habits and principles are formed: but it was by no means our intention to insinuate a doubt concerning the writer’s friendly disposition toward the interests of morality and religion. Whether Mrs. M. G.’s opinions, or ours, are most consonant to truth, and what degree of applause is due to her speculations on education, it remains with the public to determine. (119)

After turning to the public as his arbiter, Griffiths apologizes for hurting Macaulay’s feelings: “Our only reason for bringing the subject of these letters again before our readers, is, to express our regret, that our duty to the public should have obliged us in any degree to hurt the feelings of a female writer; of whose abilities as an historian, we have often expressed our unequivocal admiration.” He concludes that Macaulay is a woman of “great intellectual energy, united with the purest philanthropy.” But as a conduct book or philosophical author, he implies, she is something less than admirable.
Macaulay Writes Back: An Unpublished Protest against the
*Monthly Review*

Until recently, we could only speculate on the contents of Macaulay’s “angry, and rather impolite, letter” to the *Monthly Review*. We are now in a position to judge her side of the argument, as well as Griffiths’s characterization. The Macaulay Papers contain a draft of her letter to Griffiths. The letter, if it resembles what she ultimately sent, warrants the label “angry.” That Macaulay would have been unsatisfied with Griffiths’s chivalrous published apology may be surmised. Whether her letter deserves the label “impolite” depends on one’s sense of the fairness of book-reviewing practices in late eighteenth-century British periodicals, among other things. Macaulay wrote an astounding and moving 16-page response to Griffiths regarding the review of her book, ignoring her own advice to stay away from long tales of woe about oneself. Her letter is by turns sincere, sarcastic, self-pitying, and enraged. She writes that she has never responded to a review before but was prompted to by the unfair treatment she received from the *Monthly*: “Sir, I have never before troubled any Reviewer with my animadversions. But your Review of my Letters on education, is so uncandid and unfair it contains so many misrepresentations and is sketched over in so slovenly a manner it compels me . . . to show you that in this instance at least; you have taken upon you an office . . . which you have not in any measure fulfilled” (GLC 1794.47). Macaulay’s criticisms can be summarized as follows: (1) that the reviewer was ill-chosen and ill-prepared to assess her work; (2) that he repeatedly misrepresents or misconstrues her meanings; (3) that the reviewer is not chivalrous enough and that his chivalry is little more than irony; and (4) that the *Monthly Review* practices favoritism in its reviews. Macaulay demands either “a new Review” or the publication of her letter “as a fair criticism.” She got neither.

Macaulay’s cross letter to Griffiths must be read in the context of her long, distinguished career as an author. She had published her first book, the initial volume of her history of England, some thirty years before, to great acclaim. That celebration took a turn in the late 1770s when, as a widow, she and her young daughter moved in with her aging mentor, a rector. There is no record of Macaulay objecting when this rector, Dr. Wilson, put up a statue of her in his church, an act that drew loud complaints. She also participated in a birthday party in her honor, in which she was placed on a throne—a ridiculous position for an avowed Republican, according to her detractors. As one
caustic critic put it, her numerous band of “Poets, Patriots, Puppies, Pimps, presented their respective homages to this extraordinary idol.” Even Blue-stockings Elizabeth Carter, who had been friendly to Macaulay earlier in their lives, gave a harsh assessment in a private letter to Elizabeth Montagu. “It is really painful to observe, that with parts and talents which under the direction of happier principles, would have made a very distinguished and respectable figure, [Macaulay] has contrived to render herself so consummately ridiculous, by a total want of all sober sense. Surely nothing ever equaled that farcical parade of foolery with which she suffered herself to be flattered, and almost worshipped. . . . I think one never heard of any body, above the degree of an idiot, who took pleasure in being so dressed out with the very rags and ribbons of vanity, like a queen in a puppet show.”27 Gossip about and satires on her personal life mounted in the periodicals. Of course, shifts in the political winds did nothing to help her reputation either.

In 1783, the European Magazine concluded that Macaulay had “experienced more of the extremes of adulation and obloquy than any one of her own sex in the literary world” and that “perhaps there never was an instance, where the personal conduct of an author so much influenced the public opinion of their writings.”28 During the 1780s, she and Graham traveled, and she struggled with increasingly fragile health, living “retired from the world” (“Account” 334). There were those who nevertheless continued to celebrate her. In his Strictures on Female Education (1787), the Rev. John Bennett writes that he would “wish not to deny the fame of a [Macaulay] Graham” while maintaining that “female literature, in this country, is swelled beyond its natural dimensions.”29 Particularly in the last fifteen years of her life, Macaulay was subjected to halfhearted compliments and abuse, as recent work has shown.30 This commentary was in direct contrast to the “entirely unprecedented” “scale and nature of . . . adulation” she enjoyed in the 1760s and 1770s (Davies, CM 40). Earlier in her life, Macaulay had come “to represent the ideal of public virtue which Britain, in the years preceding the war with America, seemed so obviously to lack,” as Kate Davies argues (45). But by the late 1780s and early 1790s, Macaulay’s own confidence in inhabiting this role and her audience’s apotheosis of her in it had significantly eroded.

Although Macaulay appears to have done little to address the public criticisms of her personal life that she was subjected to in later years, in her Letters on Education she made one rejoinder of sorts. It implicitly addresses an incident from the period of her “farcical parade of foolery.” Without naming any names, she discusses the practice of placing statues in churches, an act
she informs readers that she is against, except under special circumstances: “In order, Hortensia, to impress the more strongly on the people’s minds the superiority of benevolence, to that of any other virtue; No statue, bust, or monument, should be permitted a place in the church, but of those citizens who have been especially useful in the mitigating the woes attendant on animal life; or who have been the authors of any invention, by which the happiness of man, or brute, may be rationally improved” (336). This principle on church monuments is given a prominent place in the book. It makes up the section that ends Part Two, the last in the Letters of entirely new material.

Though her comment could be seen as a subtle disapproval of Wilson’s putting up a statue of her in his church, believing it to be so would depend on seeing Macaulay as someone who was not the author of an invention by which the happiness of man or animal might be improved. Do these strictures apply to Wilson’s Macaulay statue or not? If Macaulay’s historiography could not be described as contributing to the happiness of man or animal, surely her Letters on Education could.

Set against this backdrop of criticism and response, Macaulay’s letter to Griffiths emerges as the straw that broke the author’s back. Absent of this context, it may seem to be a disproportionate reaction, but I believe Macaulay was fighting to shape her posthumous reputation in the face of evidence that it would not measure up to her expectations. The Monthly Review could make or break an author’s or a work’s reputation, as James Fieser argues. Fieser quotes William Cowper, whose playful anxiety about his upcoming review is telling: “All these [i.e., watchmakers, carpenters, bakers] read the Monthly Review, and all these will set me down for a dunce, if those terrible critics show them the example. But oh! wherever else I am accounted dull, dear Mr. Griffiths, let me pass for a genius at Olney!” 32 A 1796 reviewer presents the Monthly as answering “a double purpose; its pages being not only read in order to learn what is passing in the literary world at the moment of their appearance, but often consulted in times long subsequent, as a regular history of literature” (qtd. in Fieser 647). Macaulay’s high level of frustration with the Monthly’s reviewer (now known to be Unitarian minister and author William Enfield [1741–97]) is evident throughout her letter to Griffiths and is more understandable when seen as the result of a long-building resentment.

Her angry missive is like the Letters on Education itself in that it gives the appearance of thoughtful organization (using numbered sections and points) but occasionally proves difficult to follow. Macaulay’s letter catalogs what she believes are Enfield’s errors and misconceptions. For example, she is aggra-
vated because he mistakes her tongue-in-cheek comments about aristocratic mothers’ breastfeeding as an apology for their neglect of children. Describing the reviewer’s errors is de rigueur in this kind of letter to the editor, but what is more surprising is the way that Macaulay repeatedly calls into question her own capabilities and authority as a female author, something that she did very rarely in her publishing career. At several points she makes apologies for her shortcomings with obvious irony, but at others she is more equivocal. She rails at the reviewer, wondering at his blaming her for ideas that have been taken from Fenelon, Locke, Rousseau, and Genlis, as well as from her own experience. She also complains that Enfield has been unduly hard on her shortcomings as a classical scholar and a learned woman:

Indeed [the reviewer’s] critical rod is laid on with an unsparing hand for he has found out my weak part, he has found out that I have not read all Plato’s works; nor am acquainted with their forms; he has found out that Aristotle’s philosophy is forgotten and that mathematics are wrong placed. Now to give him a full triumph Sir I will acknowledge that I am no classical scholar that my education in this respect, has been more deficient than most of the female writers in this country and indeed Sir, if you had experienced the unremitting industry, and even labor necessary to the task of cultivating one’s own mind . . . without a guide, you would pity us poor unlearned women, and encourage us in our laudable endeavors, to fill up that void in the mind which has been made by prejudice, ignorance, and inattention. (GLC 1794.47)

She writes that it is from “a full sense of the many inconveniences that I have my self struggled with that I recommend a learned education to women.” Macaulay’s complaints about Enfield’s lack of chivalry (“Sir, pity us poor unlearned women”) seem highly sarcastic, but there are moments at which it is difficult to construe her level of seriousness. “Laudable endeavors,” for instance, seems wholly serious.

Macaulay expresses her discontent with what she sees as the false chivalry of the Monthly’s reviewer, who concludes his remarks by stating that Macaulay’s talents are not well spent on a work of philosophy: “Mrs. Macaulay Graham excels more in the character of an historian, than in that of a philosopher. The present work will, we apprehend, add little to the wreathe of honour which already graces the brow of this literary heroine.” In her response, Macaulay, who was familiar with such lukewarm praise, expresses disgust:

Your critic is pleased to say Sir that in the moral part of education I am more successful. . . . But lest I should be too much flattered with this little sweetning
of the preceding bitter, and the public led in some mistake as to the degree to which they are to rate my letters, he closes his review with an opinion that Mrs. Macaulay Graham excels more in the character of an historian than in that of a philosopher, and that he apprehends the present work will add little to the wreath of honor which already graces her brow. I have confessed to you Sir that I am an unlearned woman tho ready to pick up a little knowledge wherever I can find it now will you or yr critic be so good as to inform me what the meaning of the word philosophy is, for I protest to you that I was ignorant enough to fancy that the science of morals and the knowledge of the human mind formed the most useful branch of it. As to the compliment which seems to be implied in the last sentence of yr review alas I fear there is an ironical meaning couched in it. (GLC 1794.47)

Macaulay ironically calls herself an “unlearned woman” and then accuses the reviewer himself of irony in complimenting her as a historian. Was the reviewer questioning her right to claim achievement in that genre, too?

She follows up this section with two sad and stunning rhetorical questions: “Do not you know Sir that those historical laurels which once graced my brow are now in their wane. Do not you know that the principles and notions with which that history is replete are now exposed as antiquated absurdities” (GLC 1794.47). It is difficult to determine how seriously we should take Macaulay’s comments here or decide who precisely is the target of her sarcasm. Is she accusing the Monthly of being ignorant of her fallen historical reputation or of hypocrisy in not acknowledging it? Does she worry that her authorial powers are on the wane or simply recognize that others believe so? Does she think that contemporary historians have left her methods and conclusions behind? Is all of this just irony?

I view Macaulay as exhibiting something more than righteous sarcasm. In this letter, she reveals serious concerns about her damaged reputation as an aging woman historian. Her letter cites the successful reception of the work of John Louis De Lolme (1741–1806), which she mockingly states has exposed her own history as wrongheaded. De Lolme’s work “was cited by both supporters and opponents of the 1787 federal constitution.”35 Macaulay’s comparing her history to De Lolme’s may reflect her disenchantment with American politics as well as her disappointing standing in Great Britain. Macaulay writes,

Do not you know that Mr. de Lolme has since that history [Macaulay’s] was published condescended to enlighten [the?] country on the grand subject of
politics and shewn them the excellencies inherent in the British constitution. . . . What do you suppose in this state of public opinion my readers (if any I have) must think of my political abilities, and historical talents. . . . What will they think of my democratic spirit which would at least put the Democratic branch of our constitution on an equal footing with the other branches; . . . shame on all such reveries, they are only Sir for the reading of school girls and deserve to be committed to the lining of Trunks or other more ignoble purposes! (GLC 1794-47)

Macaulay and De Lolme represented opposing constitutional and historical views, but they also had opposite historical methods. Macaulay painstakingly worked to construct arguments from primary documents, while De Lolme had “a cavalier attitude to research,” and “the historical aspects of his analysis” were “full of errors” (Macdonnell). Nevertheless, De Lolme was “fêted by the London political establishment” (ibid.) while Macaulay suggests that she may have no readers left, save schoolgirls and those seeking paper to line trunks. Macaulay’s implying that her notions represented “reveries” in comparison to those of the fashionable De Lolme may be interrelated; her ideas had come to be seen as representative of an old-fashioned idealism. Had she lived a few more years into the French Revolutionary period, her radical republicanism might once again have seemed au courant. In 1790, however, her rhetorical questions show frank concern, as well as angry irony, about the ways in which she and her writings were being dismissed as out of touch and out of date.

Macaulay’s sense of herself as a “waning” writer may have been highly personal as well as political, tied to her realization that her long-term illness was taking its final toll. During the 1780s, she had considered writing a history of the American Revolution, a project that she apparently discontinued because of poor health (Hill, “Daughter” 42). But she obviously did not stop writing altogether, turning from history to philosophy. From the tone of the letter to Griffiths, she seems to have been shocked that she could get no better reception for her contribution to a more feminized genre, the philosophical conduct book, than she did in masculine historiography. Even if the world thought that her historical laurels were on the wane, one might read her as saying, must her authorship in another genre also be seen as superannuated? Her use of the metaphors of aging and ageism (“waning,” “antiquated”) suggests that she was well aware that her ideas were not being received as aged wisdom.

She puts this awareness even more directly before Griffiths later in the let-
Catharine Macaulay

now Sir as this is the sad condition of my Historical laurels, it is
I think a little severe if not ill natured of you and your critic to damp in this
manner the hopes of a disappointed woman, who has toiled so long in vain
over the Historic page; in her attempt to gain a little sprig of laurel in the
harmless province of morals and to tell her that her pretensions to philosophy
have yet a less foundation then her pretensions to the character of being a
good Historian” (GLC 1794:47). This passage is most unusual, as Macaulay
did not make many apologies for her sex. Before the newly discovered ma-
terials surfaced, Bridget Hill wrote that “after the appearance of [Macau-
lay’s] first volume [of history] . . . [she] did not ask for leniency on account of
her sex” (Republican 132). But Macaulay here asks for leniency not only as a
woman but also as a writer of “waning,” “antiquated” works, as a “woman
who has toiled so long”—in short, she asks for better treatment because she is
an aged female author. She makes a claim to the very chivalry she says she ab-
hors in the review, but her version offers greater leniency on the basis of sex
and age. Her rhetoric suggests that we ought to put old women writers on a
pedestal, to give their “harmless” works a “little sprig of laurel”—if we take
her comments at face value. Whether mocking, serious, or some combination
thereof, her letter shows that sex and age were central to how she imagined
herself—and how she expected others to imagine her—as a writer.

The rest of the letter resumes the tone of vitality and courage that scholars
of Macaulay rightly associate with her. She is disgruntled that more paper
could not have been given over to describing some of her “ingenious and lib-
eral observations” (GLC 1794:47). She worries that readers, swayed by the
dismissive review, will not take up her volume to find out for themselves if
the reviewer is on the mark. She notes the ways in which the Monthly Review
attempts to manipulate the reading public: “But myself and many of yr read-
ers Sir when . . . not at all interested in your partialities cannot help observing
that you have yr favorite authors whose works on the first publication are
immediately advertised in yr Review in the engaging style of panegyric. To
those favorite authors you are neither sparing of yr trouble nor yr paper, the
public attention is kept up thro two or three Reviews; and all yr powers are
exerted in a display of the beauties to be found in their works.” In her com-
plaint that Griffith’s periodical has its “favorite authors,” who are “immedi-
ately advertised” and rewarded with generous and generously sized reviews,
the example that rushes into her mind is “Mr. Badcock’s letter to the Revd
Dr. White.” Then, in a tour de force, she likens the reviewing practices of the
Monthly Review to a corrupt government. She sums up, “we cannot help
sighing to find that the Republic of letters is not free from those corruptions which disgrace most political systems.”

Badcock is the aforementioned letter writer who halfheartedly complimented Macaulay’s work, whom she cited in the Preface to her Letters on Education. Her singling him out in her letter to Griffiths may seem somewhat idiosyncratic, but he was in some ways a safe example, having died two years earlier. Badcock was someone whose “services were in constant demand by the conductors of the critical papers” and whose “most famous . . . contributions appeared in the Monthly Review.” He reviewed more than 650 works between 1779 and 1787, the most famous of those in the Monthly, and, to Editor Griffiths’s chagrin, dropped hints and made disclosures about his authorship of some of them. Badcock as a reviewer “ranks among the best known names of the [eighteenth] century.” As we saw earlier, Macaulay had tried to change parts of her Letters to address Badcock’s criticisms, perhaps in the hope of eliciting generous treatment. After his death, Badcock’s name was frequently before the public when a friend, Dr. Robert Gabriel, published a pamphlet alleging that Badcock had ghostwritten Dr. Joseph White’s Bampton lectures on the effects of Christianity and Islam (Courtney, DNB). This pamphlet would seem to be the work that Macaulay mentions in her letter to Griffiths, as it contains correspondence between Badcock and White. The pamphlet prompted a rejoinder from White, and these and other pamphlets were “widely reviewed, achieving maximum exposure for both sides” (ibid.). Is it possible that Macaulay was envious of the extent of the coverage, or was she merely frustrated at what she saw as the Monthly’s double standard in giving some works extensive positive reviews?

Another, more speculative reason we might entertain as to why Macaulay mentions Badcock in the Preface and again in her letter to Griffiths is that he may have embodied for her those things she desired to become after her death—a regretted loss, a literary insider, even a kind of founding father. Because of the scandal of the Bampton lectures, biographical notices and republications of Badcock’s poems “proliferated in periodicals in 1790–1792” (Courtney, DNB). Macaulay, perhaps following the Badcock affair and watching his stock rise while fearing her own work would not be given its due and would fall away, lashed out at the Monthly’s tepid review. In her letter to Griffiths she anticipates (correctly, as it turns out) harsh treatment by the republic of letters, returning to the rhetoric of the political arguments on which she had built her reputation. She purports to expose injustice and corruption in the reviewing process, as perpetrated on the people by the powerful few.
Her letter dwells on her own “tale of woe,” but she concludes by enlarging it, generalizing her own story into one that is emblematic of corrupt reviewing practices and the politics of powerful periodicals.

It would be wrong to characterize *Letters on Education* as an immediate critical or popular failure, despite Macaulay’s fears. In the months and years following its publication and then her death, the *Letters* enjoyed a fair amount of press. In addition to the reviews, there were some reprintings and extended published remarks on the work. The *Aberdeen Magazine* reprinted without comment two of the *Letters* sections, “On the Idea of a Sexual Difference in the Human Character” and “Various Interesting Observations on Women.” There were brief notices as well, such as the reference to the *Letters* as “excellent” and by an “ingenious female author” in a 1793 book of sermons, or the inclusion of Macaulay in a listing of “Men of Learning and Genius.”

Clara Reeve’s *Plans of Education* (1792) compares itself to Macaulay’s *Letters on Education*. Reeve, praising her predecessor’s book, also distances her own from the qualities that had prompted criticism from Macaulay’s reviewers: “I have seen Mrs. Macaulay [sic] Graham’s *Letters on Education*, in which there are many fine things, and many serious truths; but it does not interfere with my design, which is to simplify my subjects; and my method of treating them, to reduce them to the standard of common sense, and within the limits of practicability.” Reeve touts her “plain reasoning” (viii), implying that Macaulay’s *Letters* were not simple, not commonsensical, and not practical.

Even where Macaulay’s work was more directly criticized, it was seriously engaged. The author of *Literary and Critical Remarks, on Sundry Eminent Divines and Philosophers of the Last and Present Age* (1794) considered Macaulay important enough to include an ample seventy pages of commentary on her *Letters on Education*, incorporating a good deal of summary and quotation. The remarks indicate appreciation of Macaulay’s aims, sincerity, and candidness and conclude that she is a “rational sound Christian” (289). Still, the author finds much to criticize. The most persistent criticism is of Macaulay’s alleged contradictions, and it is often rendered in sexist terms. Citing Pope on women having no character at all, the author determines that Macaulay’s character is “as fickle as the hue of the chameleon” (275). Her intellectual capabilities are frequently called into question, as when she is labeled a “poor gentlewoman” unable to “write a quarter of a page without contradiction or ambiguity” (276). The author’s prejudice against Macaulay seems a theological one, finding her not high church enough and too attached to Locke (285, 503, 331–32).
But despite frequent invocations of her as ingenious and ingenuous, the author’s conclusions echo those of the *Monthly Review*. Macaulay might be said to have “‘dived into the depth of science’ to walk in the mud”; her “female shoulders sometimes totter under the Herculean weight of philosophy” (340–41). The author of *Literary and Critical Remarks* also finds occasion to dredge up Macaulay’s negative reviews. The author concludes that because of “the reception [Macaulay’s work] has met with since its emersion, [it] might have as well remained in its well” (341). The *Literary and Critical Remarks* damned the *Letters on Education* with faint praise, as well as with outright hostility. It would seem to substantiate Macaulay’s fears about the damage that the *Monthly Review*’s notice could inflict.

Macaulay’s letter to Griffiths shows that she anticipated comments like those in *Literary and Critical Remarks*, but she could not have guessed that there was far worse treatment in store. Her statement that her laurels were on the wane is too soft an expression for what she endured posthumously at the hands of one prominent and highly persistent critic. Her wish for “a little sprig of laurel in the harmless province of morals” was extinguished as her name surfaced repeatedly in the periodicals for alleged wrongdoing. Even after death, Macaulay was embroiled in scandal, as a charge circulated against her that, if true, would have made her claim to moralize (and her alleged store of life wisdom) seem laughable.

**Posthumous Scandal: Macaulay’s Unsettled Reputation**

For reasons probably more political than personal, Isaac D’Israeli (1766–1848) made an accusation against Macaulay that unleashed a fury of published letters. In his *Dissertation on Anecdotes* (1793), D’Israeli reported that Macaulay was a “dilapidator of manuscripts” who had defaced seventeenth-century state letters while working in the British Museum in 1764.47 D’Israeli ultimately acknowledged that the rumor was “impossible to authenticate,” but he also maintained that Macaulay made it a practice in her historical researches, when she came to any material unfavorable to her political leanings, to destroy the page of the manuscript (*Curiosities* 446). He offered anecdotal “proof” of just one incident, based on an ambiguous notation made in a collection of papers she had consulted at the museum, from which he claimed four leaves were missing. It was a brief mention in a long book, but the story took on a life of its own.

Reviewers of D’Israeli’s book gave prominence to the short anecdote. The conservative *British Critic* not surprisingly deemed D’Israeli’s anecdote “too
remarkable to be omitted” and reprinted it in its 180-word entirety.\(^48\) The Gentleman’s Magazine’s review (attributed to leading reviewer Richard Gough) not only approved of D’Israeli’s work; it reinforced his accusations against Macaulay by calling for greater policing at the British Museum: “Those who frequent that national repository will perhaps agree, with us, that it cannot be too well watched.”\(^49\) D’Israeli’s later work was branded by one reviewer as “very partial or exaggerated,” but most reviewers seemed to take the gossip about Macaulay at face value.\(^50\)

One suspects it would have been a shock to Macaulay that this was the great question debated about her reputation in the years after her death: Not, was she a good historian; not, did she deserve claim to some small status as a philosophical moralist; rather, had she become a thief in middle age? Did the 1764 notation by a librarian indicate that Macaulay had returned Harleian ms 7379 with missing leaves or that its leaves were missing prior to her having consulted it? D’Israeli quoted the lines in question as follows: “‘Upon Examination of the Book, November 12, 1764, these four last Leaves were torn out,’ C. Morton.” “Mem. Nov. 12th, sent down to Mrs. Macaulay.”\(^51\) D’Israeli alleged that this kind of notation was unprecedented and claimed that it proved that Macaulay had removed the pages. Letters flew in the British Critic, the Gentleman’s Magazine, and the Monthly Review. Correspondence was exchanged in print between D’Israeli and Macaulay’s widower, who had by then emerged from divinity school as Dr. William Graham. The British Critic claimed it “received more than one Remonstrance” on the subject of the accusations against Macaulay.\(^52\)

Widower Graham said he had called upon Morton, the British Museum’s former Keeper of the Manuscripts, who was then an old man. Graham wanted Morton to refute the charge of Macaulay’s dilapidations. This service was duly rendered, although Morton’s reported use of the word “rather” (in “it rather appears to me”) came under dispute.\(^53\) Graham later wrote to D’Israeli (through the periodical press), “What your motive could be in making so wanton and malicious an attack on the memory of a most worthy and amiable woman, three years after her death, I am at a loss to conceive.”\(^54\) Her death should be a protection from such vituperative comments, Graham suggests. He asks for better treatment for a woman no longer alive, just as Macaulay before him sought it for an aged female author.\(^55\)

D’Israeli refused to stoop (or rise?) to chivalry and would not let his charge die quietly. In the backmatter of his An Essay on the Manners and Genius of the Literary Character (1795), he included a page that he titled an “Advertisement.”\(^56\) The page was devoted entirely to the Macaulay debacle. D’Israeli had
not stopped writing about the charge: “I take this opportunity of declaring, that having been repeatedly attacked in the most illiberal manner by William Graham, respecting an Anecdote of Mrs. Macaulay’s mutilation of a Harleian MS. that no just reason has yet been assigned to afford me the pleasure of retracting this accusation against a Lady of her eminent talents” (225). Simultaneously asserting the anecdote as fact, as well as accusation, he did not give an inch: “At present, the mysterious note of Dr. Morton remains unexplained, yet if it is allowed to have any meaning, it must convey a charge against the Historian, and as such will no doubt be received by impartial posterity.”

He accuses Graham of mutilating Morton’s original note when he quoted from it in the periodicals. D’Israeli suggests that the husband and wife practiced similar methods when he claims, “Mr. G. had the ingenuity to give it only in the state which was most adapted to his purpose” (225). D’Israeli says he has not based his evidence on the “floating reports” of thirty years but on textual evidence: Morton’s note. D’Israeli describes his own motives as pure: “I was induced to notice this singular occurrence, not by design, but by accident; with no other view than that of literary instruction, and for no other party than that of truth.” Confident that he would be proven right by subsequent generations, D’Israeli does concede, “I cannot prove this circumstance, for I was not born when it took place.” D’Israeli points out the generational differences between him and Macaulay, claiming for himself both the vigor of youth and the good judgment of posterity.

Youth and age would continue to play a role in D’Israeli’s defense (or offense?). Decades afterward, D’Israeli was still stewing in print about the accusation against Macaulay. In his second series of Curiosities of Literature (1823), he appends the following footnote to his anecdote:

It is now about twenty-seven years ago that I first published this anecdote, at the same time that I had received information that our female historian and dilapidator had acted in this manner more than once. Such a rumour, however, it was impossible to authenticate at that distance of time, but it was at least notorious at the British Museum. The Rev. William Graham, the surviving husband of Mrs. Macaulay, intemperately called on Dr. Morton, in a very advanced period of his life, to declare, that “it appeared to him that the note does not contain any evidence that the leaves were torn out by Mrs. Macaulay.” It was more apparent to the unprejudiced, that the doctor must have singularly lost the use of his memory, when he could not explain his own official note, which, perhaps, at the time he was compelled to insert. (159)
Implying that Morton’s defense of Macaulay was due to senility, D’Israeli dismisses the word of the only person who offered firsthand testimony. He also does what he earlier claimed was unnecessary—used “floating reports” to buttress his case. Remarkably, thirty years after the initial kerfuffle, D’Israeli continued to rehash his assertions of Macaulay’s culpability. D’Israeli’s virulence alone was enough to keep Macaulay in the public eye—negatively—for decades.

D’Israeli also impugned Macaulay in his other published works, though there he maintained that she had been “forgotten.” Most notable among these is his reference to her in his *Commentaries on the Life and Reign of Charles the First, King of England* (1828), in which he dubs her “a person of high passions, which were displayed in the extravagant incidents of her life.” He allows that “a masculine genius invigorated her historical compositions” but says that her “levelling reveries, which at the time had the delusion of novelty, and perhaps her sex, created about her a party of political enthusiasts” (1: xxi). In a final damning pen stroke, he concludes, “She beheld a statue raised to herself, but she lived to see it pulled down for ever; and her unquoted name has long been deserted by every historical writer.” This is a strange statement, given that D’Israeli himself had had such an investment in quoting her name (in order to disparage it) for so long after her death. But D’Israeli, too, believed that Macaulay outlived her own good reputation. In this comment, at least, he and she would seem to be in agreement. As her letter to Griffiths demonstrates, it was a phenomenon she perceived happening before her eyes.

Attempts to recuperate Macaulay’s posthumous reputation were also made. Mary Hays’s *Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women . . . Alphabetically Arranged* (1803) describes (through information provided by her acknowledged informant, William Graham’s sister) the mistreatment that Macaulay endured: “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 in question, as if it was at all concerned with the subject.” Hays offers a moving account of Macaulay’s last years. It describes her declining health and makes the case that Macaulay’s “prospects grew brighter with her progress toward the grave: she anticipated the period when her spirit . . . should no longer be impeded in its aspirations and researches.” Given Macaulay’s responses to her last reviewers, this rhetoric about Macaulay’s bright prospects while ruminating on her own death may take on a more somber cast.
Hays’s sympathetic account paved the way for others. Anna Letitia Barbauld’s essay, “On Education,” refers to a gentleman in his library who has collected books on education, “all that were worthy of notice, from Xenophon to Locke, and from Locke to Catharine Macaulay.” In the Memoirs of Mrs. Frances Sheridan (1824), Alicia Lefanu offers a short anecdote about the meeting between her grandmother Sheridan and Macaulay, during which they praised each other’s work. After telling this story, Lefanu considers Macaulay’s reputation in its positive and negative strains. She expresses doubt about the accounts of Macaulay provided by both Hays and Boswell, skeptical of charms described by the former and of the levity and extravagance claimed by the latter. After rehearsing the charges against Macaulay of vanity and coquetry, however, Lefanu defends her: “But let us be just to the memory of a very uncommon female, who rose above the disadvantages and deficiencies of education, at a time that literature was not cultivated among women as it is at present. Small could not be the industry and perseverance of a woman, who, under these circumstances, was able to raise herself to rank with the historians of her country; nor was the merit inconsiderable of that person, who was admired by Cowper, and quoted with approbation by Mr. Fox.” Thirty years after the Vindication was published, Lefanu’s call to be just to Macaulay’s memory echoes Wollstonecraft’s, coupled with the very rhetoric that Macaulay used in her letter to Griffiths. Was this the way in which Macaulay in her old age felt she deserved to be remembered—for her industry and exceptionalism?

To say, as many have, that Macaulay was forgotten by the end of the eighteenth century is an overstatement, though she was remembered in odd ways. Her late life in particular comes in for some strange characterizations. In his Traditions and Recollections (1826), Richard Polwhele has occasion to recollect Macaulay several times, including a 1778 letter from her praising his poetry. Someone—whether Polwhele, editor, or publisher—considered Macaulay’s letter important enough to use her name in his work’s title, among its “distinguished characters” whose correspondence is printed therein. Polwhele was a one-time supporter of Macaulay’s who contributed to her infamous birthday party odes, but a note in his text (by him? by his editor?) gets the details of Macaulay’s late life completely wrong: “It is well known that Mrs. Macaulay was afterwards married to Dr. Graham (who, in the introduction to the six odes, presents his acknowledgments to Dr. Wilson, ‘through her agreeable medium’); and that, with Dr. Graham (and other champions of democracy) she emigrated to America and died there” (1: 43). Macaulay did not marry the Dr. (James) Graham mentioned in the six odes—who was her “doctor,”
though perhaps more showman than medical man. She married his younger brother. Macaulay visited but never emigrated to America; she most certainly did not die there. But this “well known” version of events makes for moving fiction—a fitting and dramatic end that is in its own way more glorious than Macaulay’s self-reported waning-away laurels and certainly more glamorous than the picture painted of her by D’Israeli.

If Macaulay’s life was misremembered (or if only its scandal was recollected), her histories continued to receive sparing and even positive notice. A largely complimentary review of Godwin’s History of the Commonwealth (1824) published in the London Review takes Godwin to task because he “overlooks the fact that [parliamentary journals] are continually referred to by Macaulay”—that she had previously conducted this sort of historical research. Godwin’s argument is compared to that of “Mrs. Macaulay,” who did not “live quite long enough” to see the wide sentiments in regard to liberty that Godwin has been able to witness. Eugene Lawrence’s Lives of the British Historians (1855) includes a scant two pages on Macaulay in its two extensive volumes, but she is the only woman so represented. He concludes, “the name of the author is hardly remembered, except among historical inquirers.”

Over the next century and a half, Catharine Macaulay became the historian whom historians liked to remember had been forgotten. Alice Stopford Green’s Woman’s Place in the World of Letters (1897) lists history as the only pre-nineteenth-century genre in which female writers excelled, and she mentions just two contributors to it: Lucy Hutchinson and Catharine Macaulay. Doris Mary Stenton wrote that “within a generation of her death,” Macaulay “had become little more than a half remembered name.” So many, for so many years, lamented the state of her reputation. In her last years, as we have seen, Macaulay expressed anxiety or perhaps anger that her renown as an author was slipping away. She may have had her own situation in mind when she wrote in an aside in the Letters on Education, “all persons of declining age feel the truth of Solomon’s reflection, that their days have been spent in a fruitless vexation of the spirit” (77). We might call this an expression of retrospective dissatisfaction or regret. Considering what Macaulay’s reputation once was, her status as an author had fallen dramatically in old age, and fruitless vanity or not, she was vexed enough to write a long letter outlining what she saw as the large and small wrongs against her. Her words might be seen as acts of self-promotion and historical preservation—or perhaps of self-preservation and historical promotion. For Macaulay, the scene of history and sense of self were closely intertwined.
In her letter to Griffiths, Macaulay suggests that she sees her alleged mistreatment by the reviewer as a systemic, not a personal, problem. Whether this was clever rhetoric or genuine perception is difficult to decide. The mixed hostile and recuperative treatment she faced after her death does little to clear up the question, other than to suggest that more than paranoia was at work in the anxious expressions about her late reputation. Macaulay was unequivocally a trailblazer among women writers, due to her extraordinary celebrity and her historical achievements; at the end of her life, she again blazed a trail by attempting to use her identity as an elderly female author to shape her late-life reception and potentially her critical afterlife, too. She took umbrage at the lack of veneration shown her and her work, and she must have understood that that lack of respect did not bode well for how her works would be received thereafter. Though Macaulay has not yet received the redress she sought from Griffiths—the publication of her “angry letter” in full—this chapter provides the possibility of her late life authorial machinations finding a fuller hearing than she has, as yet, received. Moreover, it demonstrates one older woman writer’s refusal to do what her culture expected: to go away quietly.