

WOMEN IN STUART ENGLAND AND AMERICA

A comparative study

Roger Thompson

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WOMEN'S HISTORY



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Preface

You've come a long way, baby,
To get where you've got to today!
You've got your own cigarette now, lady!
You've come a long, long way!

These immortal lines provided the refrain for one of the more urbane advertising campaigns on American television in recent years. The accompanying film sequences compared reckless Edwardian matrons, caught by scandalised husbands, secretly puffing in attics and gazebos, with cool contemporary cookies who demanded a slim, well-tailored cigarette, 'not the fat ones that men smoke'. The provision of Virginia Slims was seen by the advertisers as the climax of the liberation of American women which had begun with the suffragettes.

This book examines whether the commercial's 'long way' was not in fact a great deal longer than the copywriters claimed. Its approach is comparative. The situation of women in the seventeenth-century colonies is contrasted with that of women in England. Had women in America by the end of the first century of settlement come to enjoy a higher status in society and to perform different roles from those of their cousins in the old country? If so, what were the causes of this improvement in their lot? Finally, how was their emancipation manifested in the colonial culture, and was it a permanent feature of American life, or merely the product of the unsettling years of settlement?

Like Gaul, my attempt to answer these questions is divided into three parts. The first part of the book examines contemporary responses to the perennial 'woman question'. The second part looks at four major factors which could have contributed to the differences in women's treatment and opportunity between England and the colonies. The final part compares specific institutions and practices on the two sides of the Atlantic to see whether the four factors of contrast had their predicted effects.

One of the perennial fascinations of American history is the investigation of what national characteristics are distinctively

PREFACE

American, and what are inherited from Old-World origins. The conflict between the nature and nurture schools is far from resolution. For instance, despite reams of research, some thought, and much polemic, there is little agreement about Turner's provocative assertion that 'American democracy was born of no theorist's dream; it was not carried in the *Sarah Constant* to Virginia, nor in the *Mayflower* to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained a new strength each time it touched the frontier.'

The great majority of seventeenth-century colonists were English either by birth or by tradition. It would, however, be highly surprising if they had not been affected by their new and very different environment. (In order that environmental influences should have an opportunity to operate on colonial behaviour and outlook, this study has concentrated on the latter part of the century, that is the third or fourth generation of the earlier foundations.) It is precisely in this kind of discussion that the comparative approach can be so illuminating, the 'powerful magic wand' of Marc Bloch's description, if wisely and cautiously used. It is, I think, a matter of regret that comparisons so far have often been used in an impressionistic or jingoistic way. It is equally sad that, in other areas of study, they have not been used at all.

To prevent this study from becoming unduly ungainly and lasting a lifetime, I made the decision at a fairly early stage to limit my research in two ways. First, rather than attempt to analyse the position of women in all colonies in the seventeenth century, I would restrict myself to two which were reasonably mature by the year 1700, and which were representative of their sections. The two chosen were Massachusetts and Virginia: the former because I was working as a private researcher at Harvard, whose Houghton Library is a superb centre for colonial research; the latter because some fine work in the field had already been done, notably by Julia Cherry Spruill. The second limitation was more serious. The quantities of primary sources referring directly or indirectly to women in Stuart England are, I soon discovered, enormous. I therefore resolved with great regret to rely for the English side of the comparison on the work already done by scholars, which in itself is very considerable. While this inevitably weakens the authority of the comparisons, I do not feel that it invalidates the approach or the conclusions arrived at.

A second decision was about the scope of the study. Should it range broadly over a wide number of areas concerning women, or should it concentrate on a few aspects of the contrast, examined more exhaustively? The more I read, the more I became convinced

that the most useful approach at this stage was the former, which would try to synthesise the many strands of recent research, and also to suggest new paths for study, particularly in a comparative way. For example, a great deal of original work has been done and is still in progress on demographic aspects of seventeenth-century history, much of which has a direct bearing on the problem of women in society. Other subjects under new or renewed examination include education, the family, local government, the franchise, superstition and witchcraft, legal and political rights, and illegitimacy, all of which are similarly relevant. The approach so far, however, has tended inevitably towards local or national studies. Much more needs to be discovered about all these fields, and in such other subjects as religion, democracy, social mobility, social control, and crime and vice patterns. Nonetheless, it has seemed to me a useful exercise to point out opportunities for further research and to suggest hesitantly some comparative hypotheses that could rewardingly be tested.

To write a book about the women of three areas over the period of a century is self-evidently a vainglorious exercise. In England alone at any one time there was probably something in the region of 2.5 millions of them. As any reader of social history knows, the material on the population tends to be in inverse ratio to class numbers: there is relatively plenty on the few aristocrats, only scraps on the masses. Gentlefolk speak for themselves, but humble people speak only through official or semi-official records; the biased words of dramatists or sermonisers or hacks; or their stray encounters with the more literate classes. This will be quickly obvious in the following pages. I have tried as far as possible to examine the situation lower down the social scale, but the balance is finally irredressable.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the help of the following: the staffs of the Houghton and Widener Libraries at Harvard; Boston Public Library; Research Department, Colonial Williamsburg; University of East Anglia Library; Wayne A. Dyer, David Fischer, Jane Goddard, John Hardy, Patricia Higgins, Sheila Hinchcliffe, Peter Laslett, Victor Morgan, Keith Thomas, Christopher Turner, Andrew Wheatcroft, and—last and most—Kit Thompson.

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Part I

Introduction

Chapter 1

The Seventeenth-Century Scene

What used to be known by the unliberated as 'the woman question' is as old as Eve. There are plenty of descriptive, biographical and narrative studies on the state of play in seventeenth century England and America.¹ The drama and poetry, sermons and family histories, legal records and diaries have been ransacked by generations of scholars. We shall not reiterate the excellent work that has already been done. Here our focus will be on the less well-worked areas of transatlantic comparison and the analysis of the causes and effects of differences in women's status and roles.

Most historical study and teaching has been rigidly national in scope. This inquiry will therefore begin with a brief sketch of England and the colonies in the Stuart period. The rest of the introduction will present a survey of published popular opinion on women on the two sides of the Atlantic; contrasts in career patterns; and the comments of travellers.

Stuart England

In the eighteenth century, Englishmen rather than Frenchmen or Italians had a European reputation for turbulence and political instability, and small wonder after the upheavals of the preceding century. The profound political and constitutional changes brought about by the Civil War, the Interregnum, and the Revolution of 1688-9 are what usually catch the historical headlines. Underlying these were less spectacular developments which are more crucial for the study of women's position in English society.

The first of these factors is that highly complex movement, the rise of capitalism, continuing from preceding centuries. On the one hand, this gave rise to a new class in English society, a bourgeoisie of commerce, business, industry and bureaucracy, mainly centred on larger towns and cities. These citizens and their wives were an important new element in English social life, something of a countervailing force to that of the entrenched aristocracy. It was a commonplace of social comment that the wives of citizens were freer than any other group of women in England, perhaps

in most of Europe. On the other hand, it has been argued that, in such a plutocracy, uselessness, which is the boast or bane of both sexes in an aristocracy, is a characteristic only of women.² Furthermore, some economic historians have deplored the removal of the wife from an economically productive business partnership with her husband, and her relegation to an ornamental role.³

The concept of 'possessive individualism' was intimately connected with the development of capitalism and with intellectual movements like the growth of scepticism and toleration. Assumptions like 'What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the wills of others' cut right across cosmological theories like the great chain of being, and traditional patriarchalism in the family and the community.⁴ If woman is subsumed in 'man', then accepted ideas about the natural inferiority of woman and her subordinate position in the family or communal team are in jeopardy. Significantly, the overthrow of autocratic monarchy in 1688 gave rise to comparisons with the autocratic paterfamilias, and produced demands—albeit literary ones—for compacts between equal partners in marriage.⁵ There was, however, a less emancipating alternative. If possessiveness, rather than individualism, was stressed, then daughters or wives could be derogated into a species of property, to be bought and sold, or flashed around as a piece of ostentatious display.

The spread of calvinistic and post-calvinistic protestant dogma was linked in subtle ways with capitalism and individualism, and likewise affected the status of men, and contemporary opinion about them. This will be a major theme of succeeding chapters. Suffice it to say here that some strains in protestant and puritan thought worked in woman's favour—emphasis on an educated laity, for instance—while others, like the derivation of social attitudes from Hebrew traditions, may have worked against.

Foreign influences also played a part. The Dutchwoman of the seventeenth century was probably the most emancipated in the world. Those, like Sir Josiah Child, who sought to explain and emulate the economic and cultural 'miracle' of the Netherlands stressed women's role in it.⁶ French influence was a vital factor in English cultural development in the seventeenth century. The example of the *Précieuses* was widely praised or lampooned, depending on the point of view, in English literature thereafter. Conversely, the oppressive treatment which women still received in such underdeveloped countries as Turkey or Russia may have had some marginal effects on their treatment in England.⁷

There were three periods in the seventeenth century when the 'woman question' emerged from the undergrowth of history: the second decade, the Civil War and Interregnum years, and the last

two decades of the century. The first period witnessed a vigorous pamphlet war, fanned by the exposures of the Essex divorce scandal and the pretensions of some court and city women.⁸ The middle years of the century saw profound social as well as political change. In this upheaval women took the stage in religious, political, legal and business affairs. Some commentators have detected in the latter decades the appearance of 'the new woman'.⁹ It is true that protests by women against women's lot were made at this time. It is much less clear whether these represented the emergence of a new breed of Amazons, or total desperation at worsening conditions.

With the possible exception of the middle years of the century, there seems little doubt that the Stuart era was one of the bleaker ones for women, certainly a decline from that golden age of Renaissance flowering under the Tudors.

The Colonies

The expansion of Stuart England to the North American continent had a mixed bag of propellants—religious, economic, demographic, imperialist, missionary, to name a few. The earliest colony was Virginia, settled in 1607 and sponsored by the Virginian Company of London, a joint-stock enterprise. The economic motive was the most important in the founding of the old dominion, and its eventual success depended on the cultivation of the staple crop of tobacco. Economic and geographical conditions were responsible for the spread of the plantation system there, and the absence of large towns. The culture of tobacco was helped by the influx of large numbers of indentured servants and rather smaller numbers of African slaves. In the first century of settlement, land was fairly evenly divided among Virginians, though an aristocracy of large landholders had begun to emerge by the end of the century.

The financial problems of the Virginia Company led to the Crown taking over control of the colony in 1624. Henceforward the governor was appointed by the King. However, representative institutions, in the form of the House of Burgesses, were allowed to continue under royal government; the main unit of local government was the county. The Church of England was the established church of the colony, and power here tended to lie with the self-perpetuating vestries.

Because of royal authority, economic ties and the Anglican church, Virginia tended to be pretty closely related to England during the seventeenth century. Loyalist sentiment was strong there during the Civil War and the Interregnum, as symbolised by the outlook of its greatest Stuart governor, Sir William Berkeley, whose term of office ran from 1642 to 1677. The colony was more

affected by prevailing English ideas and fashions than was New England, and its economy was threatened by the Navigation Acts. Politically, it was reasonably stable after the first generation of settlement, the one major exception being Bacon's Rebellion of 1676. The worst source of tension for much of the century was the Indian threat, which had been a leading cause of the uprising under Bacon.

In many ways Virginia was fairly typical of the other southern settlements of the Stuart period, Maryland and Carolina. Both of these developed staple economies reliant on England, though Maryland also served as a haven for persecuted Roman Catholics. Virginia's northern and southern neighbours were both proprietary colonies, rather than directly governed by the Crown. However, what we shall be saying about Virginia in succeeding chapters will by and large be applicable to Maryland, which was one generation younger, and to Carolina, which was two.¹⁰

Efforts had been made from the start of the seventeenth century to settle the inhospitable coast of New England. The first successful attempt was that of the Plymouth Pilgrims in 1620. They were a group of about a hundred religious separatists who had already lived for a decade in exile in the Netherlands. Although important in folklore, and possibly for their religious organisation, their plantation on Cape Cod was historically less significant than neighbouring colonies. They never obtained a charter or colony status, and were merged with Massachusetts in 1691.¹¹

The colony of Massachusetts Bay was the dominant settlement in seventeenth-century New England. Although economic motives were evident, the main impetus in its foundation in 1629 was religious, and intimately linked with the Laudian persecution of puritanism in England. In the eyes of its sponsors, the Massachusetts Bay Company, the colony was to be a holy commonwealth, an exemplar to unreformed or backsliding protestantism in England and Europe. Its church polity was a form of congregationalism, and political and religious power was placed in the hands of the visible saints. During its first ten years it received a flood of some 16,000 refugees, who were organised in townships around the Bay and up the navigable rivers. Representative institutions were quickly, if not altogether willingly, granted, and for most of the century the central political authority was an elected governor, a court of assistants and a house of deputies, with the towns as the local unit of government.

Massachusetts tried to remain as independent as possible from England, although it owed its original charter of 1629 to the Crown. The only period of modest relaxation was during the post-Civil-War years. Although its puritan leadership persisted in trying to maintain provincial insularity from England, economic considera-

tions pulled in the opposite direction. Most colonists practised subsistence agriculture, but a significant minority engaged, with increasing success, in trade based on the export of fish, timber products, and, later, rum. A flourishing merchant marine was based on such ports as Boston and Salem and plied coastal, transatlantic, West Indian and Mediterranean sea routes. Connections with English mercantile houses were a vital link in this commercial web, and militated against isolationism. The home rule of the Bay Company was successfully challenged by the new English imperialism of the Restoration, and in 1684 Massachusetts was forced to surrender its charter. The second charter, issued after the alarums of the Glorious Revolution in 1691, made Massachusetts into a royal colony and broke the grip of the godly on its political machinery.

Intellectually, Massachusetts had been by far the most cultivated colony of the Stuart period. It boasted Harvard College, a printing press, a remarkably well-educated clergy and laity with scientific, literary and scholarly—as well as theological—interests and achievements. The initial utopian enthusiasm and purpose inevitably waned in the face of stability, prosperity, and a growing sentiment towards a measure of toleration. It retained, however, a purposeful sobriety and earnestness. It was undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of seventeenth-century English puritanism, if not *the* greatest. Its neighbours, Rhode Island and Connecticut, were founded as more or less protesting offshoots, transfused with money and migrants from England. Though they developed certain indigenous characteristics, they were profoundly influenced by the Bay Colony, far more than they usually cared to admit. When we subsequently analyse conditions in Massachusetts, then, we shall frequently reach conclusions applicable to all New England.¹²

The one section we shall only glance at spasmodically is the so-called middle colonies of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The first two were Dutch until their capture in 1664, and the latter was not founded until 1680. They were far more heterogeneous nationally and religiously than either Virginia or Massachusetts. In numerous ways—economic, social, theological and political, for instance—they occupied a transitional zone between north and south. Dutch influence was important in the social *mores* of the former New Netherlands, as were the Quaker and other sectarian faiths in William Penn's proprietary. I greatly regret having to omit them from this already lengthy work, for they are a most important area of study.

Finally, it is important to stress certain dissimilarities between England and her colonies, so that allowance can be made in comparisons. The new settlements, for instance, had no great cities