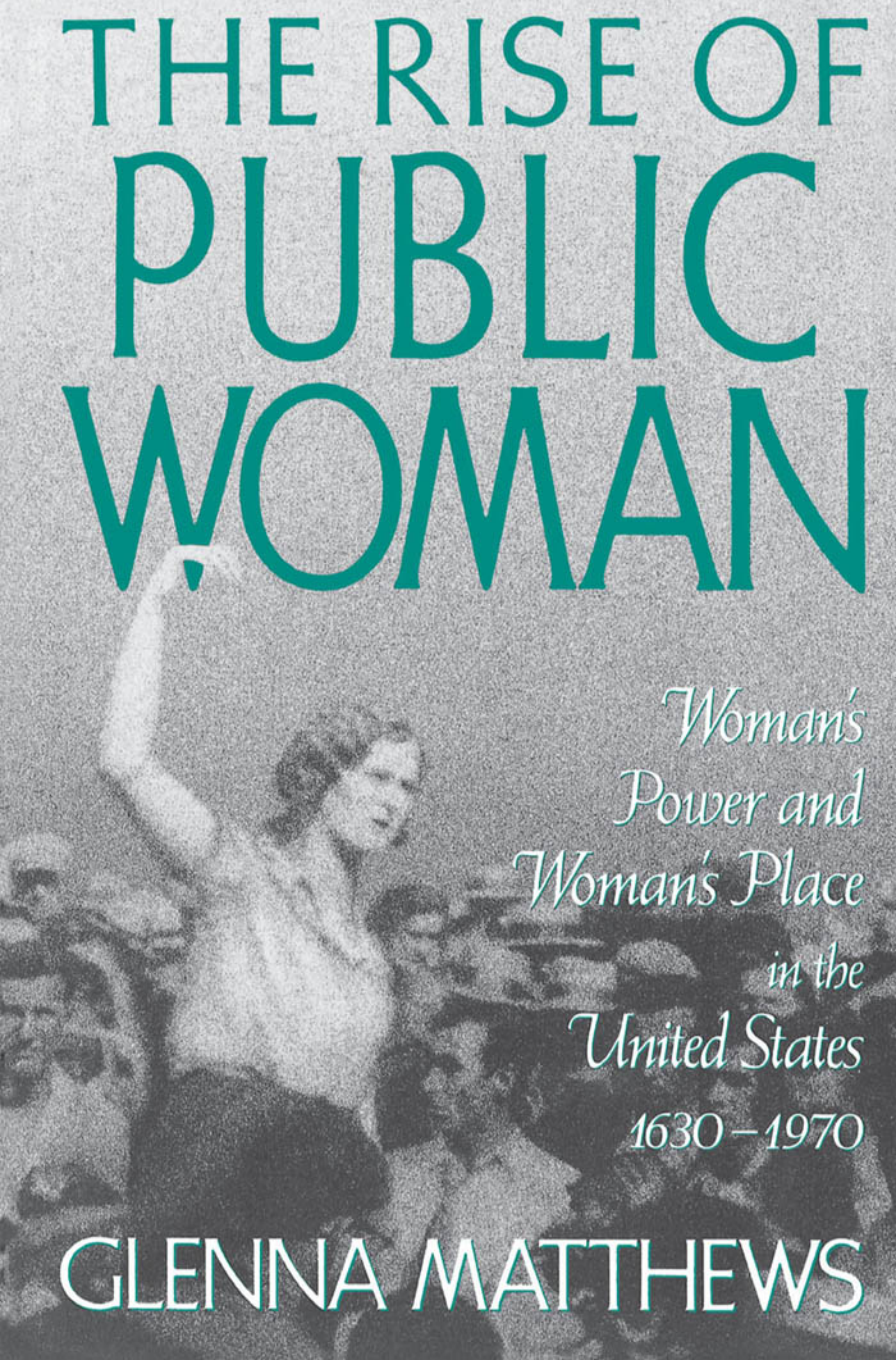


# THE RISE OF PUBLIC WOMAN



*Woman's  
Power and  
Woman's Place  
in the  
United States  
1630 – 1970*

GLENNAMATTHEWS

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Woman's Place  
in the United States,  
1630–1970

GLENNA MATTHEWS

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## *Preface*

This book owes its genesis to Berkeley, the university; and its nurturance to Berkeley, the community, and to the community of scholars in the greater Bay Area. Writing a synthetic work would not have been possible without the ability to draw upon the profusion of intellectual resources in such a locale.

The book came about this way. As a historian, I had not focused particular attention on the problem of how women legitimate a public role. Then I gained the opportunity to teach a course on women and politics because of a young woman's network, that is to say, because Elizabeth Greenberg, a friend of my daughter Karen's and a graduate student in political science at Berkeley, convinced her department chair—unbeknownst to me—to consider hiring me for such a purpose. Initially taken aback, I soon came around and prepared a draft syllabus that favorably impressed members of the department. On the first day of class, I asked the students to think of the difference in connotation between "public man" and "public woman," and together we explored the ramifications of that difference. To Elizabeth, to the

Department of Political Science, and to the superb students in PS 109, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude. Looking at the familiar material of women's history from an unusual angle of vision opened my eyes to themes I had not previously thought about, and my students shared my excitement in the discoveries we were making. Never has a teacher been blessed with a more sympathetic audience.

I worked hard on the syllabus for PS 109, and when I showed it to Sheldon Meyer, my editor at Oxford, he told me that he thought he detected a book in the making. With his encouragement, I set to work. The conversation with Sheldon took place in 1986, and I have been reading for this project ever since. Where there existed a secondary literature, I relied heavily, although not exclusively, on the work of others. Where the literature was thin, I conducted, commensurately, more of my own archival research.

I could, perhaps, amend the famous Will Rogers quote about never meeting a man he didn't like to "I never met a study group I didn't like." In any event, I have been fortunate enough to have been able to turn to many different groups for help with references, for research suggestions, and ultimately for people who would read the manuscript. Members of the Bay Area Seminar on Early American History and Culture gave valuable advice about the early chapters, and members of the Bay Area Labor History Workshop responded with dispatch to my queries about the working-class women's literary tradition. I belong to a women's group composed of public women, most of whom have run for office themselves, and they provided a reality check for my generalizations. Hearty thanks to Berkeley city auditor Anna Rabkin, Berkeley city councilmember Ann Chandler, former Boulder deputy mayor and Carter administration official Karen Paget, disabled-rights activist Judy Heumann, and legislative consultant Dion Aroner. Ranging further afield, I am grateful to the members of the teaching women's history workshop at UCLA. This group meets annually, and over the years I have learned a great deal from its members—as they will discover if they check my footnotes.

When I set out to teach in an unfamiliar area, I turned immediately for help to Ruth Mandel and Susan Carroll at the Center for

the American Woman and Politics at Rutgers. They responded with generosity and with enthusiasm. I owe a special thanks to Martin Ridge and to the Huntington Library for a fellowship, which I used while researching the library's splendid collection on women and the Civil War. I would also like to thank Patricia King, Barbara Haber, and the staff at the Schlesinger Library. As usual, their welcome made working at their facility even more of a joy than it might otherwise have been. Patricia Hills and Kevin Whitefield were kind enough to provide hospitality in Cambridge.

Fortunately, I had the chance to give talks based on this research in many different venues. The very first presentation I gave, outside of a classroom, was to the Institute for Historical Study in San Francisco. Chapter 4 originated with a paper at the Irvine Seminar on Social History and Theory. Chapter 6 first appeared in the form of a public lecture at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas and a few months later at California State University, Fullerton. I tried out the ideas in Chapter 9 before an audience at the Southwest Labor Studies Conference in Stockton in 1991. Most exciting of all was the experience of giving talks in several European cities, including Berlin, Stuttgart, and Hamburg, where I met a number of German women politicians.

Those friends who responded with alacrity to my pleas for critiques of the work in progress have placed me forever in their debt. Robin Einhorn, Karen Paget, Alice Wexler, Martha Winnacker, and Linda Witt read the entire manuscript. Dee Andrews, Deborah Gardner, Sherry Katz, Jackie Reinier, and Beverly Voloshin read selected chapters. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for any remaining errors.

One of the major influences on this book—my father, Glen Ingles—did not live to see its completion, but his impact is nonetheless present throughout. As I began my research at the Huntington, during which time I stayed with my parents, my father demanded to know if Sojourner Truth would be in my book. He then located a quote from Abigail Adams for me, a quote I subsequently used. Not bad for a man on the verge of turning ninety. His legacy to me and to my



children is that he demonstrated the possibility of lifelong engagement with ideas.

As the book neared completion, my daughter-in-law Maria and my son David became the parents of Monica Noel Matthews, my first grandchild. To them; to my mother, Alberta Ingles; to my daughter Karen Matthews; and to the rest of my family and friends, I give thanks for endlessly listening to me and for much emotional support. In particular, I am grateful to Dan Silin for providing many a neighborly cup of tea to keep me going while I was engaged in the arduous task of writing.

Once again, I thank Sheldon Meyer for being an exemplary editor and Stephanie Sakson-Ford for her care as a copy editor. Working with Oxford University Press is a joy, because the entire staff is so helpful to an author. I would also like to thank Richard Katz for his computer wizardry in linking my 1983-vintage machine to a laser printer, thus sparing the eyesight of those who worked on the manuscript.

I have tried to write a synthesis that would do justice to the multicultural nature of American democracy. To the extent that I have succeeded, much of the credit goes to the classes I met while working on this book. To look out and see the wonderful variety among the students at Irvine as well as at Berkeley is to be inspired to try harder to be inclusive. I am proud of my native state for creating so rich, diverse, and stimulating an environment as that in today's University of California. Moreover, I could dilate at some length about how hard my students worked and how much I learned from them in consequence. Suffice it to say that I will never forget them.

*Berkeley, Calif.*  
*June 1992*

G. M.

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*The Rise of Public Woman*

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# Introduction

It requires philosophy and heroism to rise above the opinion of the wise men of all nations and races that to be *unknown* is the highest testimonial woman can have to her virtue, delicacy, and refinement.

ELIZABETH CADY STANTON ET AL.  
*History of Woman Suffrage*

On the night of December 6, 1895, the police of New York City arrested Lizzie Schauer, a young working-class woman, on a charge of disorderly conduct. She had, according to her own account, been looking for the house of her aunt and had stopped to ask directions of two men. This behavior—as well as the fact that an unaccompanied woman was out at night—was presumptive evidence that she was soliciting prostitution in the eyes of the arresting police officers and of the judge who sent her to the work house. They assumed that no “respectable” woman would be unescorted at night, hence that Schauer was a “public woman,” or prostitute. Fortunately for Schauer, the *New York World* undertook a successful crusade to secure her release from the work house—but only after a doctor’s examination had shown her to be a “good girl.”<sup>1</sup>

This episode provides dramatic evidence of the tenuous nature of American womanhood’s claim on public space, even in the late nineteenth century and even after decades of political organizing by women. It further demonstrates the link between public female visibility and

sexuality: to be a public woman—in any of several senses of the term—was to risk the accusation of sexual impropriety, needless to say, a strong deterrent to such activity on the part of women. Moreover, from the time of Anne Hutchinson on, there was a handy epithet to fasten on a would-be public woman. She was a “Jezebel,” after the wife of Ahab, who exercised an undue influence on her husband, according to the book of Kings in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> Because Jezebel had used her sexuality to entice her husband into forsaking Jehovah and then into killing Jehovah’s priests, the term became a byword for a wicked and/or unclean woman whose sexuality constituted a threat to the well-being of the community.

If we think about the terms “public man” and “public woman,” we soon realize that the two have had very different connotations in Western culture. While “public woman” was an epithet for one who was seen as the dregs of society, vile, unclean, a public man was “one who acts in and for the universal good.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, “public woman” in a positive sense was literally inconceivable, because there was no language to describe so anomalous a creature, yet “public man” represented a highly valued ideal. An emerging feminist political theory deals with the roots of the dichotomy, going back to the Greeks and their exclusion of women from the polis.<sup>4</sup> It is well known that women have largely been confined to the private world of home and family, while men have functioned in the world outside the home. Even in societies where women have played a role in market activities outside the home they have been excluded from a role in the polity—except for the relatively rare instance of an occasional queen. Rare, also, has been the public space to which men and women have had access on the same terms. Men have been free to travel where and when they desired (unless they had the status of serf or slave), while women frequently risked their reputations if they attempted to do the same.

Especially serious for women has been the injunction contained in St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if

they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home.”<sup>5</sup> In the chapters to come, we shall encounter repeated instances of women who felt they had to answer St. Paul before they could speak in public.

In her brilliant work *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner discusses the artificial division of women into “respectable” and “not respectable” thousands of years ago under Middle Assyrian law—the necessary first step in the process by which “public woman” became either an oxymoron or an epithet. “Class for men was and is based on their relationship to the means of production: those who owned the means of production could dominate those who did not. For women, class is mediated through their sexual ties to a man, who then gives them access to material resources.”<sup>6</sup> A “respectable” woman under Middle Assyrian Law sexually served one man, was under his protection, and wore a veil to demonstrate her status and her confinement to the domestic realm. “. . . [W]omen not under one man’s protection and sexual control are designated as ‘public women,’ hence unveiled.”<sup>7</sup> Lerner tells us that the law provided savage punishment for a harlot who wore the veil and tried to pass herself off as respectable. Conversely, to go without the veil was to forfeit one’s status as a respectable woman.

The separation of women into respectable and not respectable and the subsequent equating of not respectable with public thus has a long history. I have chosen to write about one aspect of that history, the experience of women in the United States from the colonial period to the emergence of modern feminism. Given the invidious cast to the term “public woman,” how have American women envisioned themselves as public actors, how legitimated a public role? I would not claim that there is any one period when “public woman” definitively achieved a positive connotation, nor for that matter do I think that at the current time we see real symmetry between public men and public women. What I do think is this: cumulatively, the actions of many courageous pioneers have served to open up new possibilities for public women, both in the real world and in the realm of the imagination.

It must be immediately acknowledged that there is no single



American experience of public womanhood, but rather a multiplicity of experiences based on differences of race, class, region, religion, and ethnicity. The Protestant road to public activity for women, for example, has been different from either the Catholic or Jewish roads. Among Native Americans, women traditionally enjoyed a level of public activity, even political participation, unsurpassed by any other group of American women until recent times.<sup>8</sup> Working-class women have arguably been less constrained by decorous norms of behavior than middle-class women. And so on. Nonetheless, I believe that there are enough commonalities to make possible a synthetic overview; no matter what the group, gender roles have never been fully symmetrical.

*Webster's Dictionary* defines "public" in this way: "Of or pertaining to the people; relating to, belonging to, or affecting a nation, state, or community at large;—opposed to *private*." When we apply "public" to the roles of women, we can discern at least four possible uses of the word, analytically distinct but often overlapping in the real world: public in the legal, political, spatial, and cultural sense. In each of these areas, American women have suffered from serious liabilities.

In the first sense, the Anglo-American common-law tradition made a married woman legally invisible, her identity subsumed under that of her husband. Only if she obtained "feme sole" status could she control property or dispose of her own income. She could not serve on a jury. Her ability to write a will was severely circumscribed. Thus even if she could be considered a "public woman" owing to her participation in market activities, she lacked the same legal means for protecting her interests as those of a man of an equivalent social station.<sup>9</sup>

In the second sense, the political, we know that women in the United States lacked the guarantee of a fundamental right of democratic citizenship, the franchise, until 1920. Nor could they run for public office. As we shall learn, the lack of these rights did not prevent them from developing a political culture in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the disfranchisement of women can be understood as concrete proof of the anomalous status of the concept of public woman. Indeed, evidence exists to link public woman in the political sense

with sexual impropriety. For example, Linda Kerber has uncovered a letter from the early Republic in which a woman said that she did not want to be a citizeness, because to be a citizeness meant to be considered as a woman of the town.<sup>10</sup>

In the third sense, the spatial, or social geographic, evidence abounds to demonstrate how restricted women have been in their public access—as witness, the case of Lizzie Schauer. Much public space has been either proscribed to women, at least to respectable women, or sexually segregated. In the ensuing chapters, I shall examine the topic of the social geography of gender with some care. When could a woman alone employ public transportation with impunity? When could women work side by side with men in offices without scandal? These are important breakthroughs. (For that matter, it is still the case that an unescorted woman risks being the target of sexual epithets.) For now, a single example will suffice to illustrate the dilemma created for a woman, in this instance a middle-class woman unlike Lizzie Schauer, by the lack of access. In June 1907 the noted feminist Harriet Stanton Blatch was refused service at a New York restaurant because she was unescorted by a man. The manager explained to her that the policy had been instituted to protect “respectable” women.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, there is the issue of public access in a cultural sense—which often has a geographical dimension. One can enumerate many manifestations of limited female access in this realm. There were no women on the English-speaking stage at all until 1660, for example, and it would be well into the nineteenth century before an actress could be received in polite female society in the United States, in other words, could expect to be treated as a respectable woman.<sup>12</sup> It was virtually unheard-of for women outside the Quaker community to give public speeches until the antebellum period, and then only the bravest attempted this feat. Indeed, the taboo was so strong that a man chaired the famous meeting at Seneca Falls in 1848.<sup>13</sup> When women began to publish, they frequently hid behind a pseudonym, sometimes a male one, so that they would not render themselves vulnerable to charges of immodesty or impropriety. They had reason to be cautious. In 1830, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne denounced contemporary

women writers for exposing their “naked minds” to public scrutiny.<sup>14</sup> Finally, as Mary Ryan has shown in her recent book *Women in Public*, women played little role in public civic rituals until the late nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the struggle by American women for political rights, for full integration into political life, must be seen as part of a larger process of gaining public access more generally. Moreover, the process of gaining public access, while anchored to changing material conditions, as will be argued subsequently, is inexplicable apart from its cultural dimension. This assertion rests on the fact that women began their demands for public access and political rights *before* they enjoyed economic independence and controlled property in their own names. Indeed, as Nancy Cott points out in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, the achievement of woman suffrage was a “conceptual anomaly” because traditional explanations had “predicated the vote on having an independent stake in society”—which the law did not fully grant married women even as late as 1920.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, only full attention to such topics as the means by which women gained a public voice with which to combat traditionally patriarchal political discourse—indeed, to change the terms of the discourse—can make possible an understanding of the rise of public woman.

What makes the case of women so striking, moreover, is the fact that they are the only group which has had to struggle for political rights in a context which not only denied them the franchise but also denied them the right publicly to advocate for it. For example, in the antebellum North, Frederick Douglass, ex-slave, became a forceful abolitionist orator. While the substance of his speeches might be controversial, no one said that as a black or a former slave he had no right to stand in front of an audience. Yet his exact contemporary Angelina Grimké met this type of charge when she began publicly to oppose slavery and, after criticism of her temerity, to advocate women's rights.

It is time to sketch briefly the compass and the argument of the book to come. I shall begin in the seventeenth century by examining the public role of women in several different traditions. The major

focus of attention, however, will fall on two groups whose legacy was especially consequential for white and black American women: the Puritans and the Quakers.

It is my contention that these two religious traditions helped create and valorize a plane of subjectivity upon which men and women could meet as equals. Contemporaneous with the growth of these denominations were the spread of literacy and the diffusion of books, both of which encouraged privacy and introspection. I will argue that, paradoxically, the valorization of private life was a necessary step before women could begin to define their own identities, hence conceive of themselves as public actors, in defiance of societal taboos, and develop the self-confidence to seek and obtain a public voice.

I will then go on to explore a variety of changes in the eighteenth century that were conducive of greater female autonomy, such as new patterns of land tenure, the emergence of new norms of family life, and the possibility for independent female choice in the realm of religion that had been opened up by the Great Awakening. Because the American Revolution was so consequential for women, as demonstrated by the work of Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton,<sup>17</sup> I will devote a chapter to the subject of women and republicanism. Another important development of these years was the dawning public activity of black women, beginning in the 1770s with the published work of Phillis Wheatley—thereby beginning the articulation of what Hazel Carby calls a discourse of black womanhood<sup>18</sup>—and the creation of the first black women's voluntary organizations in the 1790s.<sup>19</sup> Finally a chapter on the emergence of the novel will explore the ways in which women were able to use the power of the word to legitimate a public role.

When we reach the nineteenth century, we will encounter a full-blown women's politics, as well as marked changes in the social geography of gender, and the beginnings of reform in married women's property laws. For the first two-thirds of the century, the flowering of public womanhood was both grounded in and constrained by domesticity, as has been demonstrated by the pioneering work of Nancy Cott,

Kathryn Kish Sklar, and others.<sup>20</sup> I will devote a chapter to the period in which this domestically based politics enjoyed perhaps its fullest expression—the Civil War years.

I will argue that the late nineteenth century then constituted a watershed, because by this time there began to be a substantial number of women who were gainfully employed outside the home. Not only that, but there was also a growing number of women who earned enough to live outside the confines of a family, if only by scraping together their resources as best they could.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, for the first time a woman's politics could be predicated on a basis other than domesticity. And where earlier in the century middle-class white women had usually, if not invariably, been the most outspoken public advocates of change, in the Gilded Age, working-class women began to come into their own, as, for example, the career of Emma Goldman will attest.

Goldman is a pivotal figure, because she was a public woman in every positive sense of the term, speaking, writing, and acting in the world, while showing herself little bound by conventional norms of appropriate female behavior. Where earlier women reformers had almost invariably been careful to protect their reputations from any charge of sexual misconduct, Goldman lived her life as she chose and paid little heed to such considerations.<sup>22</sup> Thus her life and career constitute a benchmark in establishing the possibilities for public women, in divorcing a woman's sexual conduct from her public influence.

Chapters dealing with the twentieth century will address such topics as the role of women in unions, the vast contribution of black women to the civil rights movement as well as the activities of other women of color, and the emergence of modern feminism. I will conclude with the Women's Strike for Equality on August 26, 1970, the fiftieth anniversary of suffrage. On that day there took place the largest demonstration by women in American history, thereby launching a new epoch in the history of public women.<sup>23</sup>

I want to make clear at the outset that I do not define every instance of public outspokenness by women as proto-feminist. As is well known, there is a long history of women organizing *against* fem-

inist goals, from the women's anti-suffrage leagues of the early twentieth century to Phyllis Schlafly's Stop-ERA of the recent past. I would entirely concur with the definition of feminism offered by Linda Gordon: "Feminism is a critique of male supremacy, formed and offered in the light of a will to change it, which in turn assumes a conviction that it is changeable." Quoting this, Nancy Cott goes on to say that she likes this definition, because "[i]t does not posit that what women do of a public or civic character is in itself feminist unless a challenge to male domination is present."<sup>24</sup> Again, I would concur. But feminism could never have been formulated until a wide array of women had felt some security in staking out their claims to a variety of public roles. An actress's ability to be received in polite society does not have the same weight in the history of feminism as the Seneca Falls conference, but the two are surely related.

I earlier wrote a book, *"Just a Housewife": The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in the United States*, based on the conviction that history has something important to teach us about the means by which women can liberate themselves into fuller and more gratifying lives without sacrificing the very real benefits of nurturant homes.<sup>25</sup> In other words, I was wrestling with the relationship between the home and the world and the way history illuminates this topic. I continue to be fascinated by it. In my opinion, as valuable as public access for women is, such access is only part of the solution to a better and more just world for all people. If we lack adequate provision for a nonexploitative private sphere, we will still fall short. As I did the research for this book, I became increasingly convinced that we still lack not only the practical means for reconciling justice for women and provision for the private sphere—as witness the failure of American public policy to deal with family leave, for example—but also a vision, a political theory, that gives more than superficial attention to the maintenance of private life. Thus, while this is a book about women and politics, it is also about the relationship between private and public, the personal and the political, the home and the world. I would like to contribute to what I deem to be an essential discourse.

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## *Woman's Power and Woman's Place in Seventeenth-Century America*

To consider the role of women among the indigenous peoples of North America is to be reminded that history does not move in only one direction. An account of public women in the United States that begins with the experience of Native Americans is about losses as well as gains. Before the coming of the European invaders, native peoples in what would become the United States constituted twelve major language groups as well as an estimated two thousand smaller groupings. Because it is clearly impossible in a general study to explore the variety of gender roles among so great a number of discrete tribes, the strategy will be to single out two tribes whose gender roles have been well studied, the Iroquois and the Cherokees. As it happens, the women of both tribes enjoyed public roles and a public influence that exceeded anything that would be seen among the Anglo-Americans for centuries to come.

The Iroquois, the most powerful tribal group in the Northeast, granted political power to women in two different ways. In the first place, "[p]olitical authority in the villages derived from the *ohwa-*



*chiras* at whose heads were senior women of the community. It was these women who named the men representing the clans at village and tribal councils and who named the forty-nine sachems or chiefs who met periodically at Onondaga as the the ruling council for the confederated Five Nations."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, when individual clans met, the women caucused separately and had a kind of veto power over decisions. They also possessed a de facto veto of military expeditions, because they could decide to withhold such necessary military supplies as moccasins and food.<sup>2</sup>

An observer in the early eighteenth century, a Jesuit priest, had this to say about the Iroquois women:

Nothing, however, is more real than this superiority of the women. It is of them that the nation really consists; and it is through them that the nobility of the blood, the genealogical tree and the families are perpetuated. All real authority is vested in them. The land, the fields and their harvest all belong to them. They are the souls of the councils, the arbiters of peace and of war.<sup>3</sup>

As the Iroquois lost their territory and their capacity to maintain their cultural integrity, such customs were lost, too.

Among the Cherokees, who were located in the Southeast, an especially striking trait was the sexual freedom enjoyed by married women. An eighteenth-century observer wrote, "The Cherokees are an exception to all civilized or savage nations in having no laws against adultery; they have been a considerable while under a petticoat government, and allow their women full liberty to plant their brows with horns as oft as they please, without fear of punishment."<sup>4</sup> Thus the link between sexual impropriety and public influence, ubiquitous in European culture, could not be forged, inasmuch as women were not separated into the categories of respectable and not respectable in the same way. An article by Theda Perdue elaborates some of the consequences of this situation: "Traditionally, women had a voice in Cherokee government. They spoke freely in council, and the War Woman (or Beloved Woman) decided the fate of captives. As late as 1787, a

Cherokee woman wrote Benjamin Franklin that she had delivered an address to her people urging them to maintain peace with the new American nation."<sup>5</sup> Over time, Cherokee women lost their influence, because male tribal leaders thought—wrongly—they could protect the tribe's interests by assimilating to white customs. Only in the 1980s with the election of Wilma Mankiller as the chief of the Cherokees has there been a reassertion of the traditional power of women among this group.

It is important to begin with these Amerindian alternatives to Western culture because they are reminders of the extent to which the exclusion of women from public influence among Europeans—which seemed both natural and God-given to the invaders—was, in fact, socially constructed. Moreover, we must realize that the first chapter in the history of public woman in the United States was a story of declension.

As the English arrived in the New World in the first half of the seventeenth century, they brought with them family forms and religious beliefs from the Old World, both of which soon began to change under the impact of new demographic and economic circumstances. Among the Puritans of New England, patterns of land tenure, the relatively long life spans of first-generation males, and their religious tenets all served to create an especially patriarchal pattern of authority in which women played virtually no public role. Moreover, the common-law doctrine of coverture for married women operated with particular vigor in this region.<sup>6</sup>

The father was the unquestioned head of the Puritan household, to whom both his wife and children owed obedience; toward his wife he had the reciprocal, if not symmetrical, obligation to show consideration. Fond marriages there undoubtedly were among the Puritans—as the love poetry of Anne Bradstreet will attest—but they were based on a subordinate-superordinate relationship between wife and husband, rather than the companionate norms that would come into being in a later period. Moreover, as Edmund Morgan showed in his pioneering book on the Puritan family fifty years ago, living outside the boundary of family life would have been impossible for a good

Puritan.<sup>7</sup> Everyone, including apprentices and household help, was under the authority of the father of the particular household. And the polity was made up of households, not individuals.<sup>8</sup>

At first glance, Puritan religious beliefs seem to be quite inhospitable to the claims of women. The Puritans of New England, who sought to redeem the established church in England by building their holy City on a Hill in the New World, were among the most rigorous Calvinists in human history, and Calvinists were especially likely to depict God the Father as a figure of stern authority. As the Protestant Reformation downgraded the importance of human effort and good works in favor of faith and God's grace relative to Catholic theology, so then did Calvinism go even further in this direction than had Martin Luther or the founders of the Anglican Church. John Calvin contended that God had foreordained a few to be saved and the rest to be eternally damned. There was nothing that a sinning human could do to change this awful fate. All he or she could do was to pray for the grace to live life as a "visible saint." Should the sinner be enabled so to live, there might be the hope of redemption and the terrible anxiety attendant on this system of belief might be somewhat allayed—but not permanently relieved. There was little room for a "female principle" embodying tenderness or mercy in Calvinism—except insofar as grace visited the elect. Such had been banished along with the female saints of Roman Catholicism. God was a stern and fair Being—Puritans believed that they could rely on grace because He had actually granted mankind a covenant of grace—whose earthly authority was represented by the authority of an all-male clergy and by the father of each household.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of church governance, too, women played little or no role except on rare and anomalous occasions. Puritanism evolved into Congregationalism, an established religion in most of New England until the nineteenth century. Women played no public role at either the level of the congregation, where such weighty matters as choosing a minister took place, or at higher levels.

The law reinforced these patterns. "Patriarchal authority in the Puritan family ultimately rested on the father's control of landed prop-

erty or craft skills,"<sup>10</sup> a control fully supported by statute and custom. Moreover, Puritan fathers were permitted wide discretion in how they could will property—in other words, the law provided for partible inheritance—and this meant that his heirs had strong incentives to heed the father's wishes.

Marylynn Salmon, the leading scholar of colonial women and the law, asserts unequivocally: "New Englanders gave male heads of household more control over family property, including what wives inherited or earned, than was common elsewhere."<sup>11</sup> There were several reasons for this, the most important being the Puritans' Utopian aspirations. Ideologues, they were consequently willing to be innovators and to revise English common law to conform more closely to their patriarchal ideals. For example, the law in Connecticut and Massachusetts assumed that families would be loving, so it reduced a wife's chances of protecting her own individual interests by eliminating the requirement that she must express public approval of a conveyance of property before such a conveyance could take place.<sup>12</sup> When we recall the propensity for men to live to old age, we can see that the necessary ingredients to create a powerful patriarch were in place in New England.

In certain circumstances, such as the absence or prolonged illness of her husband, a wife could act as his deputy with a fair amount of autonomy. Surviving records tell of wives who supervised complicated business transactions, who oversaw the planting of crops, who acted as attorneys for absent husbands. But ultimately they were accountable to those absent husbands for their decisions, and thus the overall system of coverture remained intact.<sup>13</sup>

The work of Carol Karlsen is telling about the penalties which could be visited on those women who "stood in the way of the orderly transmission of property from one generation of males to another."<sup>14</sup> Her research suggests that the most important single risk factor for a woman in accusations of witchcraft in late seventeenth-century New England was to be a widow without sons or brothers. Should such an individual go to court to protect her property interests, she took the chance of being accused of consorting with the Evil One. Indeed,

Karlsen contends that it was “the fear of independent women that lay at the heart of New England’s nightmare.”<sup>15</sup> And yet, as we shall be learning, it was in this seemingly inhospitable soil that seeds took root that would grow into a woman’s movement.

That the Quakers who settled Pennsylvania in the late seventeenth century would also provide many woman’s movement leaders is more immediately comprehensible. Their creed placed so much emphasis on the “Inner Light”—which might be cultivated in both men and women—as the vehicle for truth and salvation that it gave women a kind of authority both in the family and even in the outside world. Indeed, a recent scholar of the Quaker family argues that the Friends’ very survival in the absence of a church hierarchy depended on empowering women.<sup>16</sup>

As an instance in point, we have a remarkable account of a Quaker marriage, a document that provides evidence of at least one Quaker husband’s profound respect for his wife’s judgment. John Bevan was born in England in 1646 and married Barbara Awbray in 1665. Converting to Quakerism earlier than his wife, he argued unsuccessfully with her about religion until an episode involving her Anglican minister precipitated her conversion to Quakerism. One day in church the minister denounced her husband for his apostasy. “She went to the priest and spoke somewhat home to him, and that she thought she deserved more civility,” John later recalled.<sup>17</sup> After her conversion, she became so ardent a believer that she talked her husband, initially resistant to the idea, into following Penn to the New World, where they stayed for more than thirty years. She believed this move would benefit their children. Says Margaret Bacon, a scholar of Quaker women: “The Bevans’ story illustrates the central position the early Friends gave both to childraising and to the role of women in family decision-making.”<sup>18</sup>

Barbara Awbray Bevan, a woman who had the courage to speak “somewhat home” to her Anglican minister and the forcefulness of personality to talk her husband into a transatlantic relocation, was the mother of Barbara Bevan, who became a minister at the age of sixteen, one of many woman preachers among the Quakers. Thus Quaker

women comprised the first sizable group of public women in what would become the United States—other than the women of certain tribes like the Iroquois and the Cherokees. Quaker women spoke at meetings and, what is more, they traveled extensively as preachers, sometimes in the company of other women and sometimes with men not their husbands. Along the way they encountered difficulties, and even death, with fortitude. So important was this activity in the eyes of the Friends that the Society raised money to support both male and female itinerants.

From the earliest decades of the Society of Friends in England in the mid-seventeenth century, women had played a remarkable role. When they were touched by revelation, by the Divine Light, they were empowered to “speak truth to kings,” as well as priests. Known as “Mothers of Israel,” such women became legendary for their courage and for the range of their activities. Consider, for example, Elizabeth Hooton. “Elizabeth Hooton was active buying and selling property, distributing charity, and advocating prison reform, during the same period that she was admonishing the English king and the magistrates of Boston and (aged at least sixty) was stripped to the waist, tied to a cart, and whipped out of town and into the wilderness at least three different times because she kept coming back to preach.”<sup>19</sup> Of the first 59 “publishers of the truth” who came to America between 1656 and 1663, 26 were women.<sup>20</sup> As we shall be learning, Quaker women maintained their preaching into the nineteenth century (and beyond) when they would provide some of the most important women’s movement leaders such as Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony.

In addition to the role of women preachers, the Society of Friends provided another forum for the blossoming of public womanhood: women held separate meetings. Mary Maples Dunn has discovered records documenting “vigorous decision-making” in these meetings virtually from their beginnings in 1681.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in the New World—unlike England—women had more or less the same space for their meetings as did men, another indication of the importance granted them.

Yet even among Quakers, a married woman had little legal pro-

tection for the right to be an independent actor, in part because the Quakers, like the Puritans, had such high expectations of their ability to create loving and united families. For example, as in New England, Pennsylvania law did not require that a wife be separately questioned about the conveyance of property, a departure from English common law.<sup>22</sup> There were, however, some areas in which Pennsylvania wives were better off than those in New England, such as in the law governing feme sole trading. In 1718 the General Assembly of Pennsylvania gave wives of mariners or deserted wives the right to operate businesses in their own names,<sup>23</sup> a provision considerably more liberal than any in New England for some time to come. Thus, more flexible gender norms among Quakers evidently had a certain impact on the omnipresent system of legal coverture as it functioned in Pennsylvania—although it may be conceded that this reform could well have been motivated by the desire to avoid providing poor relief for destitute wives.

The Chesapeake and the area further south saw the development of a third set of regional gender norms, less patriarchal than those in New England—at first men did not live long enough to be effective patriarchs—but not so egalitarian as those influenced by the Quakers. Many scholars have documented the extent to which disease and early death rendered seventeenth-century family life in the Chesapeake chaotic. Indeed, Edmund Morgan suggests that for the first several decades an individual's chances of surviving five years after arrival—no matter what his or her age might be—were only fifty-fifty.<sup>24</sup> This extraordinary death rate made “the orderly transmission of property from one generation of males to another” difficult if not impossible to achieve. In short, as in the case of war, tragedy opened up opportunities for women.

In her pioneering study of women in the colonial South, Julia Cherry Spruill discussed a number of women who played prominent public roles in the area. For example, at the time of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia in the 1670s Sarah Drummond gave “fiery speeches” on behalf of the rebels, denouncing Governor Berkeley and urging strong action.<sup>25</sup> She was not alone as other women took public action on both sides of the controversy. But the best-known woman in the co-

lonial South was Margaret Brent of Maryland, a single woman who became one of the leading personages in the colony in the seventeenth century. Arriving from England in the New World in 1638 with her brothers and sister, she soon began to take vigorous legal action to protect the family's substantial landed property. Indeed, Spruill found that her name appeared 134 times in court records between 1642 and 1650, because she was often prosecuting her debtors. So successful was she in handling her own and her family's affairs that she frequently received the power of attorney for others. The culmination of her career as a public woman came in 1647 when Governor Calvert died, having appointed her to be his executrix, and she claimed the right to vote in the assembly—unsuccessfully it should be noted.<sup>26</sup>

If Spruill found a relatively substantial number of prominent upper-class women in the colonial South, the context for this discovery is illuminated by Salmon's work on colonial property law. High death rates undermined patriarchal property dispositions, and southern law perforce took recognition of this phenomenon; with husbands subject to such harsh demographic circumstances, it was impossible that wives be excluded from the transfer of property to the extent that they were in New England. Moreover, southern law was not based on the same high ideals of unified family life as obtained further north. In consequence, "[t]raditional safeguards against male coercion found strong support in the South."<sup>27</sup> When men started living longer, patriarchal patterns became stronger, peaking in the early eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

The dominant religion in the southern colonies, except for Catholic Maryland, was the Church of England, less stern than the Calvinism of New England but no more propitious to public activity by women. Governed by an all-male hierarchy of English bishops under the ultimate authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the monarch, the Anglican Church thus reproduced the most negative aspect of Roman Catholicism—insofar as women were concerned—the elaborate male hierarchy, but without such mitigating features as female saints or an elevated status for the Virgin Mary. In the early eighteenth century an observer noted that the gentlemen entered a particular Anglican church in Virginia in a body and left the same way, with the