

WOMEN IN STUART ENGLAND AND AMERICA

A comparative study

Roger Thompson

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY



ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY

WOMEN IN STUART ENGLAND AND
AMERICA

WOMEN IN STUART ENGLAND AND AMERICA

A comparative study

ROGER THOMPSON

Volume 38

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1974

This edition first published in 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1974 Roger Thompson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-53409-3 (Set)

eISBN: 978-0-203-10425-5 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-415-62980-5 (Volume 38)

eISBN: 978-0-203-09837-0 (Volume 38)

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

Contents

Preface	<i>page vii</i>
Part I Introduction	
1 The Seventeenth-Century Scene	3
Part II A New World	
2 The Sex Ratio	21
3 Economic Opportunities	60
4 Women and the Puritan Churches	82
5 Women and the Frontier	102
Part III Cultural Contrasts	
6 Courtship and Marriage	113
7 The Family	145
8 Women's Legal Position and Rights	161
9 Women's Education in England and the Colonies	187
10 The Vote	221
11 The Moral Tone of Society	228
Epilogue	259
Index	265

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. Rife, 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.

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

THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SCENE

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

THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SCENE

remotely comparable to London. Not only did this mean that the colonies lacked the benefits and evils of city life—and their effects on women—but they also lacked the influence that a great city exerts on its broad hinterland. Again, feudal institutions were never successfully established in British North America. Nor was there an aristocracy in the European sense, imposing its standards and economic and social control over the classes beneath it. These, and many other differences—economic, environmental, psychological, demographic, religious and social—which will be examined in subsequent chapters, must all be taken into account to prevent the mirror grossly distorting the picture.

Public Opinion about Women in England and the Colonies

The basis of any debate on the role and status of women in society rests upon the consideration of their innate capacities. This is rarely unanimous. Although women had their defenders in Stuart England, the great weight of public opinion deemed them mentally, morally, psychologically and physically inferior to men. Needless to say, the bulk of that view was formed and propagated by men, aided and abetted by many of the 'weaker sex'. Proponents of the 'better-half' ideal were also mainly male, though a few outspoken women defended the potentialities of their sex throughout the century.

It would be unreasonable to expect a radical change in the colonies. English opinions and traditions remained influential throughout the seventeenth century. Many opinion-formers there would tend to be conservative in their social thinking. Like educated Englishmen of their day, they were saturated with classical and biblical precedents which were not notably complimentary. None the less, a distinct amelioration of male attitudes is detectable in the colonies in the later part of the century, and this on the part of men of stature and influence, especially in Massachusetts.

This rapid and general survey will not pre-empt the complex and involved arguments of subsequent chapters. All that is intended here is to give a context to the discussion.

Popular stereotypes are a useful gauge to prevailing prejudices. In Stuart England calumniators painted several different caricatures labelled 'woman' with relish. One of the commonest, and most pervasive throughout all classes, was that of the woman who was all tongue: the straight blabbermouth, or the gossip and scandal-monger, or the shrew or scold. The first revealed in her vapid blatherings merely intellectual inferiority, but the others added to this a certain moral degradation as well. This failing was in the

ascendant with the second common symbol of female inferiority, the Jezebel or Dalilah figure who tempted and ensnared innocent and well-intentioned men: the 'leaden swords in a velvet scabbard'. The adulteress was uniformly held to be more culpable than the adulterer. The seductive intentions of cosmetics and fashion were a major ground for criticism. A stock character of seventeenth-century literature was the woman who could not make up her mind, or was the feather-brained slave of fickle fashion. Women were frequently depicted as wastrels, spending recklessly what their husbands got, and more. As insulting in its way was the popular view of women as sex-objects, which transcended class. Treating women as things, to be exploited and discarded, is arguably the final degradation. To the seventeenth-century mind, however, witchcraft was a horrific crime, not only blasphemy, but in some cases lust, and the identification of women with devil-worship was symbolic of their general inferiority. One way or another the seven deadly sins were represented in these cartoon images.

This common belief in women's inherent inferiority was buttressed by social custom and philosophy. The great chain of being placed women in a lower degree to men, and domestic-conduct books,¹³ sermons, and parental homilies all preached the need for wifely obedience and subordination. Woman's place was in the home, her role that of breeder and housekeeper. In gentle society she was naturally excluded from circles of male society. Her inferior education and lack of Latin usually cut her off from much of contemporary culture. It was hardly surprising that the double standard should thrive or that women should be treated as mindless ornaments or a species of property. The aims of conventional upbringing were to make daughters pliable and to give them superficial 'breeding'. Husbands were counselled to be understanding of feminine frailties and failings, but a woman who transgressed the narrow role prescribed for her was regarded as some kind of unnatural monster. Women who sought intellectual pursuits were ridiculed, their motives ascribed to lust or pride. Spinsters were objects of amused pity. Men were frequently warned against the machinations of widows. Faced with such a prevailing attitude, the prospects of being disposed of to a suitor by her parents and of ensuing frequent pregnancies, girls of Stuart England can hardly be blamed for developing a certain passive fatalism. Significantly, the commonest symbols employed to describe wives in the seventeenth century were moons, flowers which followed the sun, or mirrors.

At this stage it will be enough to give a few illustrations to demonstrate that conventional English ideas about women were transported across the Atlantic.

THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SCENE

The essentially passive qualities which Edward Taylor praises in his wife,¹⁴

As wife, a Tender, Tender, Loving Meet,
Meeke, Patient, Humble, Modest, Faithfull, Sweet
Endearing Help she was; Whose Choicest Treasure
Of earthly things she held her Husband's pleasure,

were echoed or envied by numerous male memorialists and homilists. Sermons on the subject of women reflected the injunctions of English conduct-books. Gags and ducking-stools were prescribed punishments for female scolds, and adulteresses were more severely treated than adulterers. John Winthrop was not alone in thinking intellectual pursuits a likely cause of a woman's insanity, and Thomas Parker informed his sister that 'printing a book, beyond the custom of your sex, doth rankly smell'. Edward Johnson condemned a group of females who tried to take an active part in religious life in Massachusetts as 'silly women laden with diverse lusts' and 'phantasticall madnesse'.¹⁵ In Virginia the ideal of wifely subordination ran so deep that an Anglican court supported a Quaker husband against a disobedient Anglican wife. A Virginian gentleman opined that women have 'nothing in the general view, but the heady contest at home. It began with poor Eve & ever since then has been so much of the devil in women'.¹⁶

Seventeenth-century women in England and America did not entirely lack apologists. In a period famed for both group and interpersonal violence among men, women's pacific qualities were stressed. Their civilising and stabilising attributes were praised by grateful husbands as well as by liberal preachers and pamphleteers.¹⁷ 'Howses where no woemen bee, are lyke deserts or untilled land' was a popular proverb. Puritan writers, particularly, dwelt on the benefits of companionship and a happy home life as a basis for worldly and other-worldly success.¹⁸ A stock character of drama, inherited from the Middle Ages, was the 'patient Grissel' the woman whose stamina and capacity for suffering finally won through.¹⁹ The hostile environment was an obvious target. 'Custome is an Idiot' argued the author of *Haec Vir* (1620) with typical bluntness.²⁰ Education in which women were 'beat not for but from the Muses' made them 'Education's, not Nature's Fools'.²¹ The basic assumptions of the double standard were turned on their head: 'Women not proving bad till bad men make them so'.²² In friendlier circumstances, like the golden age of the sixteenth century, or the world of the French salons, women's gifts had amply disproved male prejudices. The example of the great Elizabeth was frequently cited to demonstrate female potentialities and achieve-

ments. Progressive theologians stressed the spiritual equality, even superiority, of the 'better half'.

Much of the rest of this book will be taken up with demonstrating the relative emancipation of women in the American colonies. Here, then, a few points will suffice. 'She was good, not brilliant, useful not ornamental, and the mother of 15 children.'²³ Certainly in the first generations of settlement up to 1700 there is little evidence from either Massachusetts or Virginia that a swarm of female drones had developed. All hands, including feminine ones, were needed; without women the population would not grow to fill the empty lands. Where puritanism dominated opinion, as in Massachusetts, more liberal views on women's spiritual, moral and mental capacities could be expected to thrive. Though men fresh from England, like John Winthrop or Edward Johnson, might perpetuate English prejudices, it is noticeable that the third generation—Cotton Mather, for instance, or Benjamin Wadsworth or Benjamin Colman—concurred in the view that woman was 'a necessary good'.²⁴ The considerable migration from England after the Restoration may have added the liberal attitudes of the Interregnum to the domestic trend. The admiration expressed by influential men for Anne Bradstreet's verse contrasted starkly with prevalent English prejudice against female creativity.²⁵ Women's greater dedication to the faith was reflected in Cotton Mather's 'There are three Maries to one John', and in neither of the two colonies were the injustices and distortions of the double standard accepted as a matter of course. Women's legal rights were more consistently safeguarded in the Bay Colony and the old dominion, especially the former. The dispersed nature of settlement in the South inhibited the development of male exclusiveness and cultural apartheid, and fostered marital companionship and mutuality. The absence of large towns sustained a certain refreshing innocence in relations between the sexes. There was no overt feminist movement in the colonies in the seventeenth century, in contrast with the admittedly spasmodic and diverse protests in later Stuart England. This could represent a cowed second sex, but is more likely to mean a reasonably contented acceptance of women's situation.

Even with sophisticated modern techniques, the gauging of public opinion is notoriously difficult. It is infinitely more taxing for an age less given to scientific analysis, when the great bulk of the population was inarticulate, including the vast majority of the women themselves. The rest of this study will be given over to the sifting of evidence only alluded to in this rapid introductory survey of attitudes, and to evaluating the contention that in England the hand that held the bull-horn was male and more or less misogynist, with protesting voices scattered around the edge of the crowd,

but that the environment in the colonies was noticeably more encouraging.

Female Career Patterns

Catalogues of women who succeeded in business, medicine or estate management have already explored the available evidence, which does not need duplicating here. We are, anyway, dealing with only a tiny minority of womankind: those who, through wealth, education or some other fortunate circumstance, were able to transcend the norm. However, the ways and situations in which such women were encouraged or inhibited, and the kinds of women who left some mark on history—however fickle and arbitrary the chances of its survival may be—could well give important clues to social conventions affecting women.

One area in which a considerable number of English women participated was that of letters. Several of those who now occupy small niches in literary history intended their work to remain private; such were Katherine Phillips ('The Matchless Orinda'), Dorothy Osborne, Lucy Hutchinson, Lady Halkett and Lady Fanshawe. For all those women who wrote then, the niches are never more than small; their work was either conventionally mediocre, or downright bad.

One characteristic that emerges from an analysis of these authoresses is the number with puritan or nonconformist backgrounds. This would place them, except for the middle years of the century, outside the dominant strain of English opinion. It is noticeable that several of them came from comparatively ordinary families; the puritan faith may well have given them the spur, and the tools, to transcend their conventional situation.

A second similarity, even more marked, is the way that many of these *lettristes* shared a common strain of abnormality, be it sexual, social or familial. 'Orinda', Mary Astell and Mary Manley were, for instance, all sexually odd; the first had lesbian leanings,²⁶ the second was a man-hating recluse²⁷ and the third one of the most notorious *demi-mondaines* of her day.²⁸ Many others wrote when either unmarried, or in marriages which were atypical. Catherine Trotter, Dorothy Osborne and Mary North gave up creative writing when they 'fell under the government of another',—that is, married.²⁹ Elizabeth 'Philomela' Singer and Anne Murray both married unusually late in life, as did Mrs Centlivre.³⁰ Anne Murray wrote only as the dowager Lady Halkett. The marriages of Mrs Pix, Mrs Centlivre and Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle ('Mad Madge'), were virtually all childless. Mary Astell, Elizabeth Elstob, the great Anglo-Saxonist, and Dudleya North were all unmarried.³¹ In fact,

a significant segment of the women who wrote were in some way or another free from the restraints which would normally have inhibited them from writing at all. Their creativity does not really argue any great freedom of intellectual endeavour for women in seventeenth-century English society. Mrs Evelyn and Dorothy Osborne appear to have had talents equal to or greater than many of them, but, as normally married women, they were forced by custom to eschew the life of the pen and, to a great extent, the life of the mind.

In this context, the contrasting situation of Anne Bradstreet, the only colonial woman to achieve comparable fame, is highly instructive. Her most recent biographer supports the claim that she was 'the first serious English poetess' by arguing that 'much of the passion and determination that went into what she wrote in New England would have been lacking, or largely watered down by the traditional confinements and artificial multiplicity of the kind of life she would have led in the mother country', perhaps better defined as the fatherland. In New England, 'the masculine dependence on women for devotion, encouragement, shared planning and maintenance of the home and community led to a new respect for courage and faithful endurance of the supposedly delicate creatures'. Those who survived the trials of colonial life 'looked at one another as tested human beings, rather than as members of a superior and inferior sex'.³²

A considerable proportion of the Englishwomen who left a mark on the seventeenth century did so during the Civil War and Interregnum period. They distinguished themselves on both sides of the conflict and came from all classes of society. Some, like Brilliana, Lady Harley, or the Countess of Derby, or the besieged women of Gloucester or Bristol, saw active service.³³ Others like Jane Lane or Anne Murray performed remarkable feats as couriers or agents.³⁴ Yet others managed their absent husbands' estates, or persistently petitioned the parliamentary committees to salvage family properties. Elizabeth Lilburne was as determined an advocate as was Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle. The voice which cried out loudest against the trial of Charles I was feminine. Many men would have echoed Dr Denton's statement of 1646, 'Women were never soe usefull as now'.³⁵

Such activity among Englishwomen was unparalleled before or after the Civil War period. It was largely caused by the sudden unsettling of traditions and the removal of societal, and particularly male, restraints on women's roles. They rose remarkably to an unaccustomed challenge. Some even took the bit between their teeth and actively engaged in religious or political activity on their own account.³⁶

In many ways the colonies, especially in the early generations of settlement, provided a similar kind of environment of opportunity and similar challenges. The upsets of migration and change were not psychologically all that unlike the upsets of civil strife and revolution.³⁷ The great difference was that the English Restoration restored male hegemony, whereas the scenario of challenge was a more permanent feature of American life.

Travellers' Tales

Considering the appalling hazards of transatlantic travel, a large number of people paid visits from America to England, or from England to America.³⁸ Their comments, plus the impressions of new settlers from the Old World, ought to provide an invaluable basis for making comparisons on the status of women. Unfortunately, very few left any record that has survived; few of those had much to say about women; and several of them were profoundly unreliable.

The two Englishmen with most to say on the subject of American women were John Dunton and Ned Ward. The former was a plagiarist, the latter had never visited North America.³⁹ The stray comments of men like John Josselyn, or the Labadists Sluyter and Danckaerts, or Francis Nicholson are not to be relied on.⁴⁰ Governor Shute opined that women in New England were less grasping and materialistic than his compatriots,⁴¹ William Byrd II assumed that the hysteria of an Englishwoman newly arrived in Virginia was socially acquired rather than organic,⁴² and John Barnard found English women shyer in male company than Americans.⁴³

This paucity of comment is hardly encouraging. If this was all that people had to say, then the contrast would not seem to have been very striking, hardly worth the extended analysis that follows this introduction.

Yet there are mitigating factors. The first is that transatlantic voyagers only crossed the ocean for very specific purposes. They were, in America, intending settlers or prospectors for groups of intending settlers, returning natives, missionaries, government officials, or sea-captains and traders. Visitors from the colonies to England similarly had specific diplomatic, religious or commercial errands. There are many excellent accounts of ocean-crossings, which cease abruptly on arrival. Once they reached their destinations they were quickly immersed in their business. Samuel Johnson is a good example. This ex-tutor from Yale visited England in 1722 at the age of twenty-six. He kept a journal. We could reasonably expect from someone so able and perceptive all kinds of comments on the English scene. Yet there is nothing. The reason soon becomes

clear. Johnson had left the Congregational church; the purpose of his trip was ordination in the Church of England. His departure from New England had been bitter; he was unsure about his reception in England and his future. Small wonder, then, that his journal records in the minutest detail his relations with the dignitaries of his new church, and little else.⁴⁴

Many travellers gravitated to their own kind when abroad. New Englanders mingled with dissenters in London; Quaker missionaries moved from one colonial cell to the next; merchants consorted with merchants; and so on. This would reduce the contrasts to a minimum.⁴⁵

The art of factual social comment was itself in its infancy. General accounts, like those of Josselyn or Beverley,⁴⁶ are full of topographical information and abstruse pieces of natural history, but virtually devoid of sociological matter. When William Byrd II returned to Virginia after a four-year absence in London, instead of recording old friends met, old haunts rediscovered and changes remarked, his diary flows on in its accustomed way, noting the petty details of daily life.⁴⁷ It would be foolhardy, however, to conclude from this that Westover was the same as the West End of London.

Notes

- 1 Among the best on England are: Elisabeth Jean Gagen, *The New Woman* (New York, 1954); Maurice Ashley, *The Stuarts in Love* (London, 1963); Wallace Notestein, 'The English Woman 1580-1650' in J. H. Plumb, ed., *Studies in Social History Presented to G. M. Trevelyan* (London, 1955); M. Phillips and W. S. Tomkinson, *English Women in Life and Letters* (Oxford, 1927); Alice Clark, *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1920); Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, 1935); Carl Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen* (New York, 1968); Chilton Latham Powell, *English Domestic Relations 1487-1653* (New York, 1917); Ada Wallas, *Before the Bluestockings* (London, 1929); Myra Reynolds, *The Learned Lady in England 1650-1760* (Boston, 1920); Doris, Lady Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London, 1957); Patricia M. Higgins, 'Women in the Civil War' (unpub. M.A. thesis, Manchester, 1965). Those on American women in the colonial period include: Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill, 1938); A. W. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family* (Boston, 1918); A. B. Hart, ed., *The Commonwealth History of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1928-9) vols I, II; Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York, 1966); Eric John Dingwall, *The American Woman in History* (London, 1957); Alice Morse Earle, *Colonial Dames and Goodwives* (Boston, 1895); Edmund S. Morgan, *Virginians at Home* (Chapel Hill, 1952); Annie L. Jester, *Domestic Life in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* (Jamestown, 1957); Elizabeth A. Dexter, *Colonial Women of Affairs* (Boston, 1924).
- 2 Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness* (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 15;

THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SCENE

- Therstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London, 1925), pp. 71-2, 81-3, 178-82, 352-3.
- 3 Clark, op. cit., pp. 9, 36, 38, 291-306.
- 4 C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford, 1962), *passim*.
- 5 Richard B. Schlatter, *The Social Ideas of Religious Leaders 1660-88* (London, 1940), pp. 15-22; Gagen, op. cit., pp. 155ff.; cf. Locke's *Second Treatise*, ch. 7.
- 6 *Brief Observations Concerning Trade and the Interest of Money* (London, 1665).
- 7 Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory* (London, 1675), vol. II, pp. 395-8; Roger North, *Lives of the Norths*, ed. Augustus Jessopp (London, 1890), vol. II, p. 15.
- 8 Wright, op. cit., ch. 13.
- 9 Gagen, op. cit., *passim*, esp. chs 9, 10.
- 10 Good introductory narratives are Richard Morton, *Colonial Virginia* (Richmond, Va, 1960), and Wesley Frank Craven, *The Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (Baton Rouge, 1949).
- 11 George Langdon, *Pilgrim Colony* (New Haven, 1966); G. Willison, *Saints and Strangers* (New York, 1945).
- 12 There is a mass of writing on seventeenth-century Massachusetts, much of which will be cited in subsequent chapters. A useful introduction is A. B. Hart, op. cit., vols I, II.
- 13 Powell, op. cit., *passim*.
- 14 Thomas H. Johnson, ed., 'Topical Verses of Edward Taylor', Colonial Society of Massachusetts Publications, vol. 34 (1942), p. 537.
- 15 John Winthrop, *Journal: History of New England*, ed. J. K. Hosmer (New York, 1946), vol. II, p. 225; Morgan, op. cit., p. 44; Edward Johnson, *Wonderworking Providence of Sion's Saviour*, ed. J. F. Jameson (New York, 1937), p. 28.
- 16 Quoted by Robert E. and B. Katherine Brown, *Virginia 1705-1786: Democracy or Aristocracy?* (East Lansing, 1964), p. 55.
- 17 Notestein, op. cit., pp. 77-98; Ashley, op. cit., pp. 45ff; Reynolds, op. cit., p. 312.
- 18 James T. Johnson, 'English Puritan Thought on the Ends of Marriage', *Church History*, vol. 38 (1969), pp. 429-36; Morgan, op. cit., pp. 45-6; Calhoun, op. cit., vol. I, p. 92.
- 19 Powell, op. cit., pp. 196ff.
- 20 Wright, op. cit., p. 496.
- 21 Mary Astell, *Reflections on Marriage* (London, 1706), preface; Lady Winchilsea, quoted in Reynolds, op. cit., p. 154.
- 22 Samuel Rowlands, *An Apologie for Women*, quoted by Wright, op. cit., p. 499.
- 23 Alistair Cooke, *Talking About America* (New York, 1969), p. 130; the epitaph is on Mary Randolph Keith, buried at Washington, Kentucky. She was the mother of Chief Justice John Marshall.
- 24 Cotton Mather, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (Boston, 1691); Benjamin Wadsworth, *The Well-Ordered Family* (Boston, 1712); Jonathan Mitchell, *Nehemiah on the Wall in Troublesome Times* (Boston, 1671), esp. p. 6; Ebenezer Turell, *Life and Character of Dr. Benjamin Colman* (Boston, 1749). The phrase is John Cotton's.
- 25 Elizabeth Wade White, 'The Tenth Muse', *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series (hereafter 3 *WMQ*), vol. VIII (1951), pp. 355ff.
- 26 See her 'Orinda to Lucasia Parting'. She had no children for ten years after the death of her first-born. I owe these points to Professor John Broadbent.

- 27 Reynolds, op. cit., p. 304; Wallas, op. cit., ch. 4.
- 28 Gwendolyn B. Needham, 'Mrs Manley—Eighteenth Century Wife of Bath', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. XIV (1950-1), pp. 271-83.
- 29 Reynolds, op. cit., pp. 109, 60.
- 30 *D.N.B.*
- 31 Wallas, op. cit., chs 4, 5; *D.N.B.* sub William North.
- 32 White, op. cit., p. 375.
- 33 Higgins, op. cit., *passim*.
- 34 R. L. Ollard, *Escape of Charles II after the Battle of Worcester* (London, 1966), pp. 58-70, 80-93; Stenton, op. cit., pp. 160-1.
- 35 Higgins, op. cit., p. 187.
- 36 *Ibid.*, *passim*; Keith Thomas, 'Women and the Civil War Sects' in Trevor Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660* (London, 1965).
- 37 Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society* (Chapel Hill, 1960), p. 21.
- 38 W. L. Sachse, *Colonial Americans in England* (Madison, 1956).
- 39 John B. Nichols, ed., *Life and Errors* (London, 1818), pp. 89ff.; *John Dunton's Letters from New England*, ed. W. H. Whitmore (Boston, 1867); the full extent of the plagiarism was uncovered by Chester N. Greenough, 'John Dunton's Letters from New England', *Colonial Society of Massachusetts Publications*, vol. XIV (1912), pp. 221ff.; the originals are in the Bodleian, Rawlinson MSS, Misc. 71, 72. Ward's *A Trip to New England* (London, 1699) along with J.W.'s *Letter from New England* is in George P. Winship, ed., *In Boston in 1682 and 1699* (Providence, 1905). See Howard W. Troyer, *Ned Ward of Grub Street* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946).
- 40 John Josselyn, *An Account of Two Voyages to New England Made during the Years 1638 and 1663* (London, 1674), in Massachusetts Historical Society Collections (hereafter Mass. Hist. Soc. Colls) Third Series, vol. III (1833); on his bias, see Fulmer Mood in *Dictionary of American Biography* (*D.A.B.*). Peter Sluyter and Jasper Danckaerts were prospecting for a Labadist settlement in the New World; they were strongly anti-English. *Journal*, ed. and trans. Henry C. Murphy (Brooklyn, 1867). On Nicholson's comments, see Fairfax Downey, 'The Governor Goes A-Wooing', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter *Va Mag.*), vol. 55 (1947), p. 16.
- 41 When the diarist Samuel Sewall was moaning about the demands of Massachusetts women, he said sourly 'New England brooks its name', to which Shute replied 'they are not quite so bad here'. Samuel Sewall, *Diary*, in Mass. Hist. Soc. Colls, Fifth Series, vols V-VII (hereafter Sewall, *Diary*, vols I-III), vol. III, p. 270.
- 42 Louis B. Wright, ed., *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover 1709-12* (hereafter *Westover Diary*) (Richmond, Va, 1941), p. 322.
- 43 Mass. Hist. Soc. Colls, Third Series, vol. V (1836), pp. 203-4, 199. Barnard's visit was in 1709.
- 44 E. Edwards Beardsley, *Life and Correspondence of Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1874), pp. 18-53.
- 45 E.g. Barnard stayed with Calamy in London; Dunton was a nonconformist sympathiser. Farmer and Woolman moved from Quaker household to Quaker household.
- 46 Robert Beverley, *History and Present State of Virginia* (originally published, London, 1705; ed. Louis B. Wright, Chapel Hill, 1947).
- 47 Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling, eds, *William Byrd of Virginia: The London Diary and Other Writings* (New York, 1958), sub 1719; hereafter *London Diary*.

