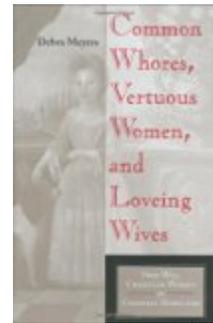


Debra Meyers. *Common Whores, Vertuous Women, and Loveing Wives: Free Will Christian Women in Colonial Maryland*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. xiv + 250 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34193-8.

Reviewed by Mary Carroll Johansen (Department of History, Holy Family University)  
Published on H-South (March, 2006)



## Religious Beliefs and Female Autonomy in the Colonial Chesapeake

Nearly thirty years ago, Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh posited that the short life expectancy prevalent in seventeenth-century Maryland endowed women with more power than they possessed in New England, where longer lives and marriages were the rule. Carr and Walsh observed that mothers, who often married two or three times before themselves succumbing to an early death, served as the common ties binding together families of step-siblings and parents; husbands, recognizing their wives' status, named them as executors of their wills and guardians of their children far more often than did New England male testators, who preferred to name other men as guardians and executors.[1] Departing from the demographic interpretation of Carr and Walsh, Debra Meyers offers religious difference as the primary factor explaining the decisions of male decedents.

Meyers differentiates between Free Will (Roman Catholic, Arminian Anglican, and Quaker) and Predestinarian (Puritan, Presbyterian, and Baptist) Christians in seventeenth-century Maryland. Her thesis is that religious beliefs caused Free Will Christians to grant women more autonomy in religious and secular affairs than Predestinarian Christians were willing to accord them. Predestinarians, emphasizing that God had decided before an individual's birth whether a person would be saved or damned, frequently reminded women that they were descendants of the first sinner, Eve, and thus likely to be damned. Since God chose whom He would elect, no Predestinarian could expect to exercise agency in life, least of all women. Free Will Christians were of the opinion

that all people, through their beliefs and actions, made conscious decisions whether to accept or to reject God's salvation. Moreover, Free Will Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, offered both male and female saints as exemplars and intercessors, with the Virgin Mary at the pinnacle of the saintly hierarchy. Free Will Christians' willingness to accord women agency in the religious sphere, Meyers argues, carried over into secular affairs.

To test her thesis, Meyers studied 3,190 wills left by Maryland testators between 1634 and 1713; material culture sources including church architecture and gravestones; and literary evidence such as sermons, advice literature, family genealogies and naming patterns. In a statistical analysis of her most important evidence, wills, she found that Free Will Christian men in all wealth categories granted their wives land use for life or freeholds approximately 80 percent of the time, while Predestinarians granted their widows control over the land approximately 60 percent of the time among the wealthiest landholders, but just 36 percent of the time among the smallest freeholders. Moreover, Predestinarian wives who predeceased their husbands never left wills, while among Free Will women leaving wills, approximately 20 percent were married. In addition, Meyers offers the examples of Free Will women who sued to act as executors when not named to that position by their late husbands, or who reached agreements to act as sole executors when initially named co-executors in their husbands' wills. In contrast, Predestinarian women exhibited a reluctance to

serve as executors, and a willingness to relinquish the role if requested. This dichotomy, Meyers argues, implies that Free Will women held power within their marriages – perceiving themselves as their husbands’ “yoak fellows” (p. 134) – while among Predestinarians, husbands treated their wives as they treated their daughters: as dependents who exercised no agency within the family. A similar treatment of wives by Predestinarian and Free Will male testators in England, Meyers notes, suggests that “Maryland inheritance patterns may have been based on English practice” (p. 154).

Margaret Brent has served as the iconic Maryland woman: an astute businesswoman and adroit politician who was assertive enough to demand political rights based on her role as the attorney for Maryland proprietor Lord Baltimore. Meyers would argue that Brent’s status came not just from her wealth, or her friendship with Governor Leonard Calvert, or her status as a single woman, but preeminently from her religious role as a Free Will Christian, a woman accustomed to exercising agency. Meyers offers similar examples of Free Will Christian women exercising political responsibility during Calvinist rebellions in Maryland in 1655 and 1689—a pattern, she implies, with no analogy among the Predestinarians. Meyers’s discussion of the role of elite women in Maryland complements Kathleen Brown’s findings for Virginia, where Anglican women served as advocates on both sides of Bacon’s rebellion (although Brown makes no claim that religion influenced women’s actions).[2]

Other historians, however, have found numerous examples of Predestinarian women exhibiting agency and power. Laurel Ulrich coined the term “deputy husband” to describe women who served as their husbands’ attorneys in complex business transactions in seventeenth-century northern New England.[3] Cornelia Dayton, in studying the impact of the law on Puritan women in colonial Connecticut, argued that “Puritan jurisprudence, by encouraging lay pleadings and by insisting upon godly rules, created unusual opportunities for women’s voices to be heard in court”; these voices included examples of *feme soles* who ran businesses and litigated their debts in court. On the other hand, Dayton continued, the Anglicization of the colony and the accompanying professionalization of the courts in the eighteenth century “raised barriers to women’s early use of the courts.”[4] Mary Beth Norton posited that New England’s Puritan women lived in a Filmerian society of interlocking hierarchies: high-ranking males ruled over their own wives and children, as well as over the lower-ranking males and their families. Yet, Norton asserted, this Filmerian system in-

cluded within it anomalies that permitted some women to exercise more power. Since mothers held a degree of authority within the family, and the family was the basis of the political system, women could validly claim to wield limited power in society at large. Moreover, high-status women could claim precedence over low-status men, and widows existed as women without male governors. “High-status widowed mothers” thus could serve as “flashpoints for conflict” in Filmerian New England. Although not a widow, Anne Hutchinson, who was a high-status mother, certainly wielded political influence in Massachusetts Bay colony, and continued to act in a leadership role for the Puritan followers who accompanied her to Rhode Island after her banishment from Massachusetts. In contrast, Norton argued, in the Chesapeake a Lockean system of government prevailed, based not on the family but on a contractual agreement among men as the basis for political power. Under the Lockean system, women could be completely excluded from political power, as, indeed, Margaret Brent was when she sought the right to vote.[5]

Were, then, the Predestinarian women of Maryland anomalous in their lack of autonomy? Meyers has found that they were far less likely than their Free Will counterparts to receive an education, to hold separate estates, or to engage in business transactions, at a time when Predestinarian women in other colonies did enjoy these opportunities. Or, were Free Will Maryland women unique in their relative independence? The evidence is suggestive, but not conclusive. Certainly Meyers’s statistical analysis presents compelling evidence of contrasting treatment of women among Free Will and Predestinarian testators. However, she makes the occasional leap in interpretation that seems unsubstantiated by evidence (as in the presumption that Father Peter Attwood’s sermon criticizing women for “conversation, and diversions unbecoming a Christian” was a response to Free Will Christian women’s discussions of “economics, politics, and religion” (p.119), or her assertion that, “Women who were wealthy patrons of their churches and the sponsors of new sacred spaces probably enjoyed greater authority within their religious communities than others” (p.108), a statement that is made without any supporting evidence). Meyers does, however, offer a provocative new idea for religious history, namely that Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Quakers shared a common set of beliefs that caused them to act in concert on social issues. In the eighteenth century, however, the relative autonomy enjoyed by Free Will Maryland women declined, as male testators bequeathed less real estate to female heirs; Meyers

notes this change in her conclusion and suggests some reasons behind the shift, but the eighteenth century lies beyond the scope of her study. Future historians investigating the reasons behind women's declining authority in eighteenth-century Maryland may shed further light on the extent to which religion was the crucial factor determining women's roles in the colonial Chesapeake.

#### Notes

[1]. Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 34 (1977): pp. 542-571.

[2]. Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1996), pp. 262-267.

[3]. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and*

*Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 35-38.

[4]. Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1995), pp. 10-11, 15, 93-95.

[5]. Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mother and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 10-14, 359-399.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

**Citation:** Mary Carroll Johansen. Review of Meyers, Debra, *Common Whores, Vertuous Women, and Loveing Wives: Free Will Christian Women in Colonial Maryland*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11491>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).