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Larry D. Eldridge, ed.. *Women and Freedom in Early America.* New York: New York University Press, 1997. 354 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-2193-3.

Reviewed by Jane T. Merritt

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PART I. Race, Ethnicity, and Gender. PART II. Religion. PART III. Work and the Colonial Economy. PART IV. Marriage and the Family. PART V. Society and the Courts.

This eclectic collection of essays, ***Women and Freedom in Early America***, edited by Larry D. Eldridge, skillfully accomplishes one of its intended, if somewhat old-fashioned goals: "to better understand the lives [women] led, the struggles they faced, the tragedies, triumphs, foibles, and fulfillment that made up their existence" (p. 4). The compilation of 16 essays, averaging 15-20 pages each (including notes), represents the wide range of current scholarship on women in early America, and offers a substantial volume that will enhance any graduate seminar reading list. Here you will find new material on the cultural, religious, economic, social, and legal roles of women whether married, widowed, or single; black, white, or Indian; urban or backcountry dweller; rich or poor; Quaker, Catholic, or Baptist; free or unfree. This last aspect of women's lives--their differing and shifting degrees of freedom--is the organizing principle of the volume. Beyond describing women's lives, the authors address "how freedom was defined for and by women, how it was achieved or missed, how the parameters and realizations of freedom expanded or contracted over time" (p. 2).

Aye, there's the rub! Freedom is perhaps too slippery a concept to tie together the diverse threads of these essays. How exactly is freedom being used? Are we talking about a legal status or a relative range of social activities? Are these apples and oranges? Can we use the same standard of measurement for African and African American women, who were faced with the possibility of having all degrees of personal freedom taken from them, as we use for aristocratic women in New France, who had the "freedom" to use their political connections and economic clout to keep their husbands in power and their families in good standing? (See Ashcraft-Eason and Noel, respectively.) Looking back from a time and place that venerates and defends freedom as an individual right, we might wonder whether women of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would even apply this concept to their lives and circum-

stances. I don't mean to imply that women's social roles and strategies for exercising female autonomy are not worth exploring. I'm just wondering whether "freedom" accurately conveys their motives. Indeed, what sounds like a radical concept--fighting for some small degree of freedom--turns on very conservative parameters in most of these essays. Women contend for their "freedom" to operate within an Ulrichian paradigm of well-established gender roles as wives, mothers, widows, deputy husbands, or spiritual centers of home and community.

Judith A. Ridner's, "To Have a Sufficient Maintenance': Women and the Economics of Freedom in Frontier Pennsylvania, 1750-1800," is a well-crafted example of this restrained freedom. For women in the mid-Atlantic backcountry, freedom "meant being able to work within traditional gender bounds, and even within the bonds of marriage, to attain a level of economic standing or security that would ensure the continued well-being of themselves and their families" (p. 168). Frontier women managed the domestic sphere, cared for children, manufactured household goods, assisted husbands, and traded at local market. Although Ridner portrays these independent-minded women as "actively defending the economic, and specifically the property, interest of their families" (pp. 175-76), they did so by asserting their "utter dependence and subordination" (p. 182). For instance, poverty-stricken Revolutionary War widows or women who faced the abuse of husbands threw themselves on the mercy of the court, underscoring their helplessness to gain assistance. They were not petitioning for their own economic "freedom" per se, they were simply using a rhetorical strategy to ensure the survival of their family, children, and household. According to Lillian Ashcraft-Eason, "Freedom among African Women Servants and Slaves in the Seventeenth-Century British Colonies," even African women, forcibly brought to the Americas, carried cultural baggage with them and acted within the limits of traditional social expectations. African women responded to situations in the New World according to the caste systems and hierarchies that they knew in the Old. Like women in the Pennsylvania backcountry, African women equated freedom not with individual autonomy, but with membership in a larger kin group. A slave, by contrast, was a person without lineage, gods, or traditions, and without kinfolk to give these cultural symbols meaning. African women did what they thought necessary to obtain freedom for themselves or their progeny--they converted to Christianity or had relations with free men.

By the eighteenth century, however, status became closely tied to race; "Free became synonymous with white" (p. 76). As these two diverse essays imply, women in early America were not individualists--a term often, and anachronistically, associated with freedom in early America. Women instead pressed the envelop of gender boundaries for the sake of community, kinship networks, family, and children--especially male children. Martha J. King, in " What Providence Has Brought Them to Be': Widows, Work, and Print Culture in Colonial Charleston," looks at the economic activities of two related and well-connected widows, Elizabeth Timothy and Ann Timothy. In 1738, Elizabeth, widowed at a young age, took over a printing and publishing business when her husband died. Even though she gained the rights of feme sole, enabling her to exchange property, sue debtors, sign contracts, and eventually buy out her husband's partner, Benjamin Franklin, she did so to pass the thriving business on to her son, Peter. Ann Donavan later became Peter Timothy's wife and had to manage the business at the end of the Revolution, when her husband was exiled from Charleston. Only by "the fate of husbands" were these women "propelled into a professional and public sphere they would not otherwise have occupied" (p. 162). Vivian Conger, in " If Widow, Both Housewife and Husband May Be': Widows' Testamentary Freedom in Colonial Massachusetts and Maryland," also examines widows autonomy and their relationship to their families

and children. Conger finds that widows not only had an important role distributing wealth and managing family property, but, at least in Massachusetts, they increasingly tried to settle property on their female rather than male offspring. Still, Conger admits that giving property to unmarried daughters had little to do with guaranteeing their "freedom" and more to do with increasing their "marketability" to a good husband (p. 260). Widows, married women, and even single women often exercised their "freedom" within the confines of acceptable roles. Mothers hoped to provide their daughters a smooth transition from the single to the married state.

There were, however, some women who adamantly defended their feme sole status. Karin Wulf, in "My Dear Liberty': Quaker Spinsterhood and Female Autonomy in Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania," gives a nuanced reading of Quaker "spinsters" poetic and theological defense of singlehood. A few Quaker women rejected patriarchy and chose to remain single "as a form of resistance" to the sexual hierarchies "inherent in marriage" (p. 88). They justified their decision by citing the individual's responsibility to attain salvation, which might be impeded by marital hierarchies. However, Wulf is careful to point out that few women had the economic or social independence to live separately. Even the "freedom" of singlehood was not the freedom of an individualist. More successful at maintaining social arrangements separate from patriarchy were the transient women of Rhode Island. (See Ruth Wallis Herndon, "Women of No Particular Home': Town Leaders and Female Transients in Rhode Island, 1750-1800.") By the late eighteenth century, the disruption of wars had taken their toll, leaving many people with broken households or searching for more stable economic situations outside their communities of origin. In a careful perusal of 1,800 warn-out orders and 800 transient examinations, Herndon found that only "a third of the examinants lived within patriarchal families. Men without wives and children accounted for ten to twenty percent of the examinants; and women without husbands, fathers, or masters accounted for 50 percent" (p. 277). Most of these women supported themselves by performing domestic service or other marginal jobs. They also initiated ties to other women in the community--sharing single parent household or creating mother-daughter households. Many of these women found strategies to avoid removal by appealing to the paternalism of government officials and courts; others "chose instead to express their disdain for the conventions and procedures of the authorities" (p. 282). White women's relative freedom, so carefully gleaned from the sources in most of these essays, looks very different when placed in the context of Native American society. Gretchen Green and Eirlys M. Barker tackle the issue of race, gender, and freedom for Iroquois women and native women of the southeast, respectively. As most studies of Native American women do, they contrast the idealized matri-lineal and women-centered households of Indian communities with patriarchal Euro-American society. To them, women in Indian society experienced a "high degree of respect and freedom" (p. 44) while white women struggled under the onus of male-dominance and dependency. Indian women had important roles as go-betweens in the fur trade and, unlike their white counterparts, they had the power to marry, divorce, and control children and the household. Encounters with Euro-Americans eventually upset the gender balance of native societies. However, we have to be careful not to exaggerate the equality or freedom within these communities. Indian women also acted within well-established and bounded gender expectations, even if they seemed relatively more flexible.

For all the diversity of place, class, and race, women in early America had remarkably similar experiences. They contended with various legal restrictions to their public actions, they mastered artisanal and economic principles to provide for their families, and they tried to balance a desire

for autonomy with their need of kin and community support systems. And though these common experiences may not have had the radical implications that historians sometimes seek, they add to our understanding of the important social structures that make up our past.