

## **Massachusetts Sex Ways:** Puritan Ideas of Flesh and the Spirit

Sex among the Puritans was very far from being puritanical in the popular sense. Copulation was not a taboo subject in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, as it later became in the nineteenth. It was discussed so openly that the writings of the Puritans required heavy editing before they were thought fit to print even in the mid-twentieth century. But sex in Massachusetts was distinctly puritanical in another meaning. The sexual attitudes and acts of the Bay colonists were closely linked to religious beliefs. Where controlled regional comparisons can be made by a quantitative method, we find that their sexual behavior was distinctly different from the non-Puritan colonies. At the same time, Massachusetts sex ways were remarkably similar to prevailing customs in East Anglia, as distinct from other parts of England. The Puritans ever encouraged sexual asceticism. They did not value chastity in the Roman Catholic sense as highly as other Christians did. The Boston minister Samuel Willard explicitly condemned "theist conceit of the excellency of virginity." John Cotton wrote that "women are creatures without which there is no comfortable living for man: it is true of them what to be said of governments, that bad ones are better than none."

Puritans also commonly believed that an intimate sexual bond between husbands and wives was an important and even a necessary part of marriage. Correspondence between Puritan husbands and wives often expressed their love for one another in strong sensual terms. John Winthrop and his wife Margaret wrote often in this way: "My dearly beloved wife," he began, ". . . my heart is at home, and specially with thee my best beloved ... with the sweetest kisses and pure embracings of my kindest affection I rest thine...."

Sexual relations within marriage were protected by the Puritans from the prying eyes of others, and surrounded with as much privacy as was possible in that culture. A court in New England indicted a man because "he could not keep from boys and servants, secret passages betwixt him and his wife about the marriage bed."

Sex outside of marriage, however, was regarded very differently. The Puritans followed the teachings of the Old Testament in believing that adultery was a sin of the deepest dye. They defined an adulterous act in the conventional way as extramarital sex involving a married woman (not necessarily a married man), but punished both partners with high severity. Their criminal codes made adultery a capital crime, and at least three people were actually hanged for it in the Puritan colonies.

When cases of adultery occurred, it was not uncommon for entire communities to band together and punish the transgressors. In the town of Ipswich, Massachusetts, for example, a married woman named Sarah Roe had an affair with a neighbor named Joseph Leigh while her mariner-husband was away at sea. Several townsmen warned them to stop.

---

"Anne Bradstreet, "To My Dear and Loving Husband," in *Seventeenth Century American Poetry*, ed. Harrison T. Meserole (1968, rpt. New York, 1972), 32.

When they persisted, no fewer than thirty-five Ipswich neighbors went to court against them and gave testimony that communicated a deep sense of moral outrage. In this case, adultery could not be proved according to New England's stringent rules for capital crime, which required two eye-witnesses to the actual offense. But the erring couple were found guilty of "unlawful familiarity" and severely punished. Joseph Leigh was ordered to be heavily whipped and fined five pounds, and Sarah Roe was sent to the House of Correction for a month, with orders that she was to appear in Ipswich meetinghouse on lecture day bearing a sign, "For My bawdy Carriage," written in "fair capital letters." In this case as in so many others, the moral code of Puritan Massachusetts was not imposed by a small elite upon an unwilling people; it rose from customs and beliefs that were broadly shared throughout the Puritan colonies.

In cases of fornication the rules were also very strict. For an act of coitus with an unwed woman, the criminal laws of Puritan Massachusetts decreed that a man could be jailed, whipped, fined, disfranchised and forced to marry his partner. Even in betrothed couples, sexual intercourse before marriage was regarded as a pollution which had to be purged before they could take its place in society and---most important---before their children could be baptized. In both courts and churches, the Puritans created an elaborate public ritual by which fornicators were cleansed of their sin, so that they could be speedily admitted to full moral fellowship.

In New England, unlike other parts of British America, men and women were punished in an exceptionally even-handed for sexual transgressions. Where differences appeared in penalties for fornication, males suffered more severely than females in New England. The custom of the Chesapeake colonies was the reverse.

These rules were obeyed. In Massachusetts during the seventeenth century, rates of prenuptial pregnancy were among the lowest in the Western world. In the towns of Hingham, Sudbury and Concord, the proportion of brides who were pregnant on their wedding day approached zero in the period from 1650 to 1680. This pattern was not universal in New England. Premarital pregnancy was more common in seaports on the social periphery of the region and in the pluralist settlements of Rhode Island. Everywhere it tended to increase during the late seventeenth century. But by comparison with other colonies it remained exceptionally low in most parts of New England during the first fifty years of settlement.

Bastardy was also very rare in the Puritan colonies. Few cases occurred in the first generation, and were punished with great rigor. As time passed, rates of illegitimacy tended to rise throughout New England, but always remained lower than in other parts of British America. This New England pattern, which differed very much from other colonies, was similar to East Anglia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Historian Peter Laslett and his colleagues find that the eastern counties in general, and the counties of Suffolk and Norfolk in particular, had the lowest rates of illegitimacy in England.

---

Amy Buchbinder, "Unlawful Familiarity in Ipswich," (paper, Brandeis, 26 Nov. 1986); the case appears in *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County*, V, 143-46 (1672). There was, however, strong reluctance to impose capital punishment for adultery. In Connecticut, Governor John Winthrop, Jr., refused to approve a death sentence imposed on Hannah Hackleton after she had freely confessed to adultery. The magistrates refused to approve his decision for a year, while Hannah languished in a Connecticut jail. Finally her sentence was commuted to a whipping, and the law was changed so that adultery ceased to be a capital crime in Connecticut. In Massachusetts, nobody was sentenced to death for this offense after 1644, but many were punished by banishment, imprisonment, whippings and fines. See John Murrin, "Trial by Jury in Seventeenth-Century New England," in David D. Hall, John Murrin and Thad Tate, eds., *Saints and Revolutionaries* (New York, 1984), 190-93.

Rates of prenuptial pregnancy in 9 Massachusetts towns were as follows: Marriage

Proportion of First Births Within

Town	Cohort	7 mos.	8 mos.	8.5 mos.	9 mos.
Hingham	pre-1660	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	1661-80	5.0		11.2	11.2
Watertown	pre-1660		11.1		
	1661-80		8.6		
Nantucket	pre-1699		11.1		
	1700-1709		0.0		
Dedham	1661-69	4.8		4.8	4.8
	1671-80	2.8		8.5	11.1
Andover	1655-74				0.0
	1675-99				12.5
Topsfield	1660-79	7.7		7.7	7.7
	1680-99	2.3		4.5	6.8
Salem	1651-70				5.3
	1671-1700	8.2			
Boston	1651-55	3.6		6.0	14.3
Ipswich	1651-87	3.8		6.0	8.2

Daniel Scott Smith and M. S. Hindus, "Premarital Pregnancy in America, 1640-1971," *JH* 5 (1975), 537-70; Daniel Scott Smith, "The Long Cycle in American Illegitimacy and Prenuptial Pregnancy," in Peter Laslett et al., *Bastardy and Its Comparative History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 362-78; Robert V. Wells, "Illegitimacy and Bridal Pregnancy in Colonial America," *ibid.*, 349-61. Rates of prenuptial pregnancy in most parts of England and the Chesapeake colonies were generally much higher in the same period. For another study which also concludes that the ratio of bridal pregnancy in the county of Middlesex, Massachusetts, was "minuscule in comparison with England or the Southern colonies" see Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649-1699* (Amherst, 1986), 70.

<sup>1</sup>As late as 1764, the rate of illegitimacy in Middlesex County, Massachusetts, was 7.7 per 1000 live births. This as we shall see was lower even than among Quaker families, and very far below bastardy rates in the Chesapeake colonies, which were ten to twenty times higher. See Robert V. Wells, "Illegitimacy and Bridal Pregnancy in Early America," and Daniel Scott Smith, "The Long Cycle," in Laslett, *Bastardy and Its Comparative History*, 349-61, 362-78.

The sexual discipline of the Puritan colonies was not achieved by Christian asceticism. Relationships between men and women were highly charged with sexual tension in this culture. It was assumed by the courts that if healthy adult men and women were alone together, they would probably be engaged in a sexual relationship. Married men and women were generally forbidden to meet privately with others of the opposite sex, unless related. Unmarried people were carefully watched by the community, and offenders were publicly denounced. When one wayward Puritan attempted to seduce a woman in 1650, she told him, "I will make you a shame to all New England." Undeterred, he forced himself upon her, even though her child lay beside her in the bed. Afterwards, she told him, "Put your finger but a little in the fire [and] you will not be able to endure it, but I must suffer eternally."

Laslett reports the following illegitimacy ratios (that is, bastards as a percent of baptisms) by English region in the period of American colonization:

Region	1581-1640	1661-1720
Eastern Counties	1.2	1.0
Southern Counties	2.1	1.4
Midland Counties	1.6	1.3
West and Northwest	3.6	1.4
Northern Counties	2.9	1.3

Source: Peter Laslett, "Long-term Trends in Bastardy in Britain," in *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* (Cambridge, 1977), 137-42.

Puritan attitudes were almost maniacally hostile to what they regarded as unnatural sex. More than other religious groups, they had a genuine horror of sexual perversion. Masturbation was made a capital crime in the colony of New Haven. Bestiality was punished by death, and that sentence was sometimes executed in circumstances so bizarre as to tell us much about the sex ways of New England. One such case in New Haven involved a one-eyed servant named George Spencer, who had often been on the wrong side of the law, and was suspected of many depravities by his neighbors. When a sow gave birth to a deformed pig which also had one eye, the unfortunate man was accused of bestiality. Under great pressure, he confessed, recanted, confessed again, and recanted once more. The laws of New England made conviction difficult: bestiality was a capital crime and required two witnesses for conviction

But so relentless were the magistrates that the deformed piglet was admitted as one witness, and the recanted confession was accepted as another. George Spencer was hanged for bestiality. That case was not unique in the sexual history of New Haven. When a second deformed pig was born in that troubled town, another unfortunate eccentric was also accused of bestiality by his neighbors. Even though he could not be convicted under the two witness rule, he was imprisoned longer than anybody else in the history of the colony. When yet a third defective piglet was born with one red eye and what appeared to be a penis growing out of its head, the magistrates compelled everyone in town to view it in hopes of catching the malefactor. The people of New Haven seem to have been perfectly obsessed by fear of unnatural sex. When a dog belonging to Nicholas Bayly was observed trying to copulate with a sow, neighbors urged that it be killed. Mrs. Bayly refused and incautiously made a joke of it, saying of her dog, "if he had not a bitch, he must have something." The magistrates of New Haven were not amused. Merely for making light of bestiality, the Baylys were banished from the town.

Two people were also hanged for bestiality in Massachusetts, and even jests on that subject were punished ferociously in the Bay Colony. Bestiality was also a capital crime in other English jurisdictions, but New England's intensity of concern was something special. This hostility to unnatural sex had a demographic consequence of high importance. Puritan moralists condemned as unnatural any attempt to prevent conception within marriage. This was not a common attitude in world history. Most primitive cultures have practiced some form of contraception, often with high success. Iroquois squaws made diaphragms of birchbark; African slaves used pessaries of elephant dung to prevent pregnancy. European women employed beeswax disks, cabbage leaves, spermicides of lead, whitewash and tar. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, coitus interruptus and the use of sheepgut condoms became widespread in Europe. But the Puritans would have none of these unnatural practices. They found a clear rule in Genesis 38, where Onan "spilled his seed upon the ground" in an effort to prevent conception and the Lord slew him. In Massachusetts, seed-spilling in general was known as the "hideous sin of Onanism." A Puritan could not practice coitus interruptus and keep his faith. Every demographic test of contraception within marriage yields negative results in Puritan Massachusetts. The burden of this taboo rested heavily upon families throughout New England. Samuel Sewall, at the age of 49, recorded the birth of his fourteenth child, and added a prayer, "It may be my dear wife may now leave off bearing." So she did, but only by reaching the age of menopause.

This general pattern of sexual attitudes—strong encouragement of sexual love and sensual bonds within marriage, strict punishment of fornication and adultery, a maniacal horror of unnatural sex, and rigid taboos against contraception within marriage—was in its totality unique to New England. By and large, this culture was not a system of sexual tyranny and repression. The sex ways of Massachusetts rested upon an intensity of moral and religious purpose which marked so many aspects of this culture.

These tests for contraception within marriage include age-specific intramarital fertility, total marital fertility, the wife's age at last birth, intergenetic intervals, completed family size, and fertility by age at marriage. Family reconstitution studies have been completed by the author and his students and research assistants. All yield firmly negative results for contraception within marriage before 1790, except Nantucket with its large Quaker population, and one cohort in Hingham.

## Virginia Sex Ways: Male Predators and Female Breeders

Sexual relations between men and women tended to be less strictly regulated in the Chesapeake than in Puritan New England. They were also regulated in a different way. Rates of prenuptial pregnancy during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century were comparatively high in the Chesapeake region---higher than in the Puritan colonies, particularly among indentured servants. In Somerset County, Maryland, more than a third of immigrant brides were pregnant before they married. Overall, about a fifth of all women who married in that county, immigrants and natives together, were carrying a child on their wedding day.

Despite this tendency, or perhaps because of it, fornication was not punished as frequently or as severely in the Chesapeake colonies as it had been in New England. In Maryland, the courts did not often hear cases of this sort, despite very high rates of illegitimacy and prenuptial pregnancy. When they did so, the female was punished severely, usually by whipping. But the male either escaped with a token penalty such as a bond for good behavior, or in most cases was not punished at all. This pattern of discrimination against women in fornication cases was the reverse of New England customs, which penalized the male more harshly than the female during the early and mid-seventeenth century.

Rates of prenuptial pregnancy in the Chesapeake colonies were as follows:  
Percent of First Births Within

Place	Cohort	7 mos.	8 mos.	8.5 mos.	9 mos.
Somerset County, Md. Immigrants	1665-95	23.7%	32.9%	34.2%	36.8%
Somerset County, Md. Natives	1665-95	9.5%	19.0%	19.0%	20.6%
Middlesex County, Va. Christ Church Parish	1720-36	9.4%		15.2%	16.8%
Gloucester County, Va. Kingston Parish	1749-60 1761-70	2.8% 12.1%		13.9% 22.7%	13.9% 24.2%
Richmond County, Va.	1710-19 1720-29 1730-39 1740-49 1750-59		18.7% 9.8% 33.3% 33.3% 38.5%		

Sources: Menard and Walsh, "Demography of Somerset County," 23; Lois Green Carr and Lorena Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: the Experience of White Women in Seventeenth Century Maryland," *WMQ* 34 (1977), 547-48; Daniel Scott Smith and Michael S. Hindus, "Prenuptial Pregnancy in America, 1640-1971: An Overview and Interpretation," *JIH* 5 (1975), 537-70; Robert V. Wells, "Illegitimacy and Bridal Pregnancy in Colonial America," in Peter Laslett et al., eds., *Bastardy and Its Comparative History* (Cambridge, 1980), 349-61; Lee Gladwin, "Tobacco and Sex: Factors Affecting Non-Marital Sexual Behavior in Colonial Virginia," *JSOCH* 12 (1978), 57-78.

Bastardy was punished with savage ferocity in the Chesapeake. When an unmarried woman gave birth outside of wedlock, a heavy fine was levied upon her. If the fine could not be paid (as often happened), she was trussed up like an animal, her dress was ripped open to the waist, and she was publicly whipped in the sight of a shouting mob until the blood flowed in rivulets down her naked back and breasts. Further, if she was a servant, she was also required to compensate her master for the time lost in her pregnancy by serving an additional term, even in some cases when he was the father of the child. Bastardy was regarded as an offense of the utmost seriousness in Virginia---not because it was a sexual transgression, but because it threatened to place a burden of support on the parish poor rolls, and to deprive a master of work that was thought due to him.

Other sexual offenses were also punished in seventeenth-century Virginia, but not in the same way as in New England. Adultery was a case in point. In both New England and Virginia, adultery was defined as extramarital sex involving a married woman (not necessarily a married man). One study has found that in Massachusetts, men and women found guilty of adultery in most cases received similar punishments. In the Chesapeake, however, adulterous women were punished more harshly than adulterous men. For that offense, women were flogged severely or dragged through the water behind a boat until they nearly drowned. Men were treated leniently.

Illegitimate births in two counties of southern Maryland were very common:

Place	Date	Per 1000 Total Births	Per 1000 Population	Per 1000 Single Women 15-44
Prince George's Co., Md.	1696-99	26	1.7	17.2
Somerset Co., Md.	1666-70	63	2.5	32.1
	1671-75	68	2.8	34.7
	1676	75	3.3	38.3
	1683	68	3.1	34.7
	1688-94	118	5.9	60.2

Sources: Menard and Walsh, "Demography of Somerset County," 35; Wells, "Illegitimacy and Bridal Pregnancy in Early America," and Daniel Scott Smith, "The Long Cycle in American Illegitimacy and Prenuptial Pregnancy," in Laslett et al., eds., *Bastardy and Its Comparative History*, 349-61, 362-78.

This difference was not the result of mindless or instinctive sexism. It rested upon the assumption that the bloodline within a family was threatened by a wife's adultery, but not by the husband's. That way of thinking was more important in Anglican Virginia than in Puritan New England. Here again we find evidence that Virginians held themselves to different standards of behavior according to their rank, gender and standing in society.

A multiple standard of sexual behavior (not merely a double standard) appeared not only in the laws of Virginia but also in its customs. Women, especially gentlewomen, were held to the strictest standards of sexual virtue. Men, especially gentlemen, were encouraged by the customs of the country to maintain a predatory attitude toward women. A famous example was the secret diary of William Byrd II, an exceptionally full and graphic record of one planter's very active sex life. In its attitude toward sex, this work was very different from any diary that was kept in Puritan New England. William Byrd was a sexual predator. Promiscuous activity was a continuing part of his mature life, and in some periods an obsession. With very mixed success, he attempted to seduce relatives, neighbors, casual acquaintances, strangers, prostitutes, the wives of his best friends, and servants both black and white, on whom he often forced himself, much against their wishes.

In the period 1709 to 1712, for example, when Byrd was more or less happily married, he was frequently engaged in sexual adventures:

2 [November 1709] I played at [r-m] with Mrs. Chiswell and kissed her on the bed till she was angry and my wife also was uneasy about it, and cried as soon as the company was gone. I neglected to say my prayers, which I ought not to have done, because I ought to beg pardon for the lust I had for another man's wife.

It is important to note that the remorse he felt on this occasion had to mainly do with his sense of violating another gentleman's property. More often, he felt no remorse at all. Sometimes Byrd and his Virginia gentleman-friends went on collective woman hunts:

11 Mar. 1711. After church Mr. Goodwin invited us to dinner and I ate fish. Here we saw a fine widow Mrs. O-s-b-r-n who had been handsome in her time. From hence we went to Mr. B's where we drank cider and saw Molly King, a pretty black girl.

20 [October 1711] Jenny, an Indian girl, had got drunk and made us good sport.

21 [October 1711] At night I asked a negro girl to kiss me.

During this period in his life, Byrd's sexual adventures were comparatively restrained. After his wife died, he sometimes engaged in this activity on a daily basis. An example comes from a visit to London in the month of September 1719:

8 September ... saw two women, a mother and daughter who stayed about two hours and then came Mrs. Johnson with whom I supped and ate some fricasee of rabbit and about ten went to bed with her and lay all night and rogered her twice ...

9 September ... the two Misses Cornish called on us to go to Southwark Fair. We were no sooner there but Sally Cornish was so ill she was forced to go away to her sister and Colonel Cecil and I gallanted them to G-v-n [Covent] Garden

11 September ... I wrote some English till nine and then came Mrs. S-t-r-d. I drank a glass of wine to our good rest and then went to bed and rogered her three times. However, I could not sleep and neglected my prayers....

14 ... About eight I went to Mrs. Smith's where I met Molly and had some oysters for supper and about eleven we went to bed and I rogered her twice ...

17 ... about seven I went to Mrs. FitzHerbert's where I ate some boiled pork and drank some ale. About nine I walked away and picked up a girl whom I carried to the bagnio and rogered her twice very well. It rained abundance in the night.

October was a lean month.

1 October ... we went to Will's and from thence to the play, where was abundance of company and particularly Mrs. [Cambridge], as pretty as an angel.

2 October ... went to meet Molly H-r-t-n at Mrs. Smith's in Jermyn Street where I went to bed with her and lay till 9 o'clock but could do nothing. Then we had chicken for supper and I gave her two Guineas and about twelve walked home and neglected my prayers ...

6 October.... endeavored to pick up a whore but could not. I neglected my prayers, for which God forgive me ...

7 October ... picked up a whore and carried her to a tavern where I gave her a supper and we ate a broiled fowl. We did nothing but fool and parted about 11 o'clock and I walked home and neglected my prayers ...

Within a few weeks he was well again.

16 October picked up a woman and went to the tavern where we had a broiled fowl and afterwards I committed uncleanness for which God forgive me. About eleven I went home and neglected my prayers.

20 October ... to the play where I saw nobody I liked so went to Will's and stayed about an hour and then went to Mrs. Smith's where I met a very tall woman and rogered her three times ...

In November, William Byrd and his English gentleman-friends were prowling in packs.

11 November, went with Lord Orrery to Mrs B-r-t-n where we found two chambermaids that my Lord had ordered to be got for us and I rogered one of them and about 9 o'clock returned again to Will's where Betty S-t-r-d called on me in a coach and I went with her to a bagnio and rogered her twice, for which God forgive me ...

12 ... sat a little with Mrs. Perry ...

13 ... took my ways towards Mrs. Southwell's but she was from home. Then I walked in the park and went to Ozinda's ... After we went to Will's ... then ... to Mistress B-r-t and stayed about an hour

14 ... went away to Will's where a woman called on me. .. then went to a bagnio where I rogered my woman but once. Her name was Sally Cook. There was a terrible noise in the night like a woman crying...

22 ... walked home and by the way picked up a woman and committed uncleanness with her, for which God forgive me ...

28 ... I ate some boiled milk for supper and romped with Molly F-r-s-y and about 9 o'clock retired and kissed the maid so that I committed uncleanness, for which God forgive me.

29 ... After dinner it rained, that I could not walk so was content to romp with Molly F-r-s-y. In the evening we drank tea, and then sat and talked till seven, when I ate some boiled milk for supper. After supper we sat and talked and romped a little. About ten I retired and kissed the maid and said my prayers ...

Sexual predators such as William Byrd have existed in every society. But some cultures more than others have tended to encourage their activities, and even to condone them. This was the case in tidewater Virginia, with its strong ideas of male supremacy and masculine assertiveness. William Byrd's behavior differed only in degree from Thomas Jefferson's relentless pursuit of Mrs. Walker, or George Washington's clumsy flirtation with Mrs. Fairfax. These men represented the best of their culture; the sexual activities of other planters made even William Byrd appear a model of restraint. An old tidewater folk saying in Prince George's County, Maryland, defined a virgin as a girl who could run faster than her uncle.

The sexual predators of Virginia found many opportunities among indentured servant girls during the seventeenth century. The journal of John Harrower described free and easy fornication with female servants in Virginia. Exceptionally high rates of prenuptial pregnancy and illegitimacy among English female immigrants to Virginia was in part due to this cause. There is evidence in the records that some masters deliberately impregnated their servants as a way of extending their indentures.

In the eighteenth century, race slavery created other opportunities for planter predators, some of whom started at an early age to exercise *a droit du seigneur* over women in the slave quarters. Philip Fithian noted that the master's son, Bob Carter, one Sunday morning took "a likely Negro girl" into the stable and was for a "considerable time lock'd ... together." Bob was sixteen years old.

The abolitionist indictment of slavery for its association with predatory sex had a solid foundation in historical fact. One thinks of Mary Boykin Chesnut's response to the antislavery movement in the nineteenth century:

Like the patriarchs of old our men live in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children-and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds.... You see, Mrs. Stowe did not hit on the sorest spot. She makes Legree a bachelor.

Mrs. Chesnut knew whereof she spoke, and was haunted by her knowledge of sexual predators within her own family. But she (and the abolitionists, and many historians too) were very much mistaken in thinking that the "peculiar institution" of race slavery itself was the first cause of this behavior. The same pattern had appeared in Virginia before slavery was widespread. It had also existed in rural England.

The cultural idea of the predatory male was carried very far in early Virginia---even to the point of condoning rape. The diaries and commonplace books of Anglo-American gentlemen often recorded a complaisant and even jocular attitude toward rape that differed very much from prevailing mores in Puritan New England. The founders of New England made rape a hanging crime. In the courts of the Chesapeake colonies, it was sometimes punished less severely than petty theft--a different attitude from the Puritan colonies.

The sex ways of the southern colonies differed from New England in other ways as well. Virginians had a way of thinking about fertility which set them apart from New England Puritans. The people of Virginia thought less of the biblical commandment to increase and multiply and replenish the earth which so obsessed the Puritans, and more of breeding stocks and bloodlines. Children of the elite were bred to one another in a manner not unlike dogs and horses. Much interest was shown in blood lines. The gentry of Virginia studied one another's genealogies as closely as a stockman would scrutinize his stud books.

Gentlemen took pride in the fertility of their women and their animals---sometimes in the same breath. A seventeenth-century gentleman named William Blundell expressed delight in his *menage*, when within 24 hours his wife was delivered of a son, his prize cow produced a calf, a sow dropped fifteen piglets, a bitch gave birth to sixteen puppies, a cat had four kittens, and his hens laid fifteen eggs.

Women in the Chesapeake were called "breeders," a word not unknown in New England, but decidedly uncommon. A great planter, Landon Carter, complained of Virginia ladies, "I do believe women have nothing general in view, but the breeding contests at home. It began with poor Eve and ever since then has been so much of the devil in woman."

Little girls were encouraged to think of themselves in these terms. The Presbyterian tutor at Nomini Hall, Philip Vickers Fithian, was shocked to discover Fanny Carter (aged ten) and Harriet (aged six) playing at pregnancy. "Among the many womanish Fribbles which our little Misses daily practise," he wrote in his diary, "I discovered one today no less merry than natural; *Fanny* and *Harriet* by stuffing rags and other Lumber under their Gowns just below their Apron-Strings, were prodigiously charmed at their resemblance to Pregnant Women! They blushed, however, pretty deeply on discovering that I saw them."

There was little prudery in this society---less than in New England. A visitor to Virginia was startled to see ladies buying naked male slaves after carefully examining their genitals. The earthiness of this culture appeared in a case of adultery heard by the court of Accomack and Northampton counties in 1643. Two witnesses, John Tully and Susanna Kennett, heard a "great snoring" on a house. John Tully testified that "there was a hogshead of tobacco in the entrie directly agynst the door, so this deponent and the said Susanna stood upon the said hogshead," and peered inside. They saw Goodwife Mary West and Richard Jones lying abed, "both arm in arm," Jones asleep and snoring lustily into Mary West's plackett. Susanna Kennett testified that she saw Mary West

put her hand in his codpiece and shake him by the member, whereupon this deponent could not forbear from laughing. And then this deponent and the said Tully did run away from the place where they stood.

What was striking about this episode was not merely the event itself, but the spirit in which it was described, which was far removed from the tone (if not the substance) of prevailing sexual attitudes in Puritan New England.

## **Delaware Sex Ways:** "Not to Go into Her but for Propagation"

The Quaker doctrine that "in souls there is no sex" also had another meaning. Among Friends, the Inner Light was thought to be the enemy of the carnal spirit. Quakers drew a sharp distinction between love and lust. William Penn wrote, "It is the difference betwixt lust and love that this is fixed, that volatile. Love grows, lust wastes by enjoyment."

The meetings of Friends, often very active in the discipline of their members, heard sexual offenses less frequently than did Puritans or Anglicans; but when they did so, the punishments were severe. Fornication before marriage, a venial sin for Puritans of Massachusetts and the Anglicans of Virginia, was sometimes cause for disownment, the heaviest penalty in the power of a meeting to inflict. The Leeds preparative meeting, for example, heard only three cases of fornication in twenty years (1692--1712)---all males. But two cases ended in disownment; the third offender was allowed to remain only after receiving condemnation in two successive meetings.

Quakers were specially interested in ending the sexual exploitation of social inferiors. George Fox in 1672 insisted that any master who had sexual relations with a female servant must marry her, "no matter what the difference in outward rank or race."<sup>3</sup> The meetings of Friends also specifically condemned the predatory attitude toward sexuality which had been so much a part of Virginia's sexual customs. The Marsden monthly meeting agreed that

All men who hunt after women, from woman to woman, and also women whose affection runs some time after one man and soon after to another and so ... draws out the affection one of another and after a while leaves one another and goes to others and do the same things and the doing makes them more like sodomites than the saints and is not of God's moving nor joyning together.

In addition to these actions by Quaker meetings, the public laws of Pennsylvania were very harsh in their repression of sexual offenses. That colony's Law Code of 1683 included a statute against fornication which specified that both single men and women should be punished "by enjoying marriage, or fine, or corporal punishment, or any or all of these." This statute was more rigorous than those of Massachusetts, Virginia or England. After 1700 it was disallowed by the Crown as "unreasonable."

For adultery, the penalty in Pennsylvania after 1682 was a year's imprisonment for the first offense and life imprisonment for the second. A revision in 1700 required that adulterers on the third offense should be branded on the forehead with the letter A. They were not merely required to sew the letter to their clothing as in New England. Quakers decreed that the faces of adulterers should be disfigured permanently for their crime. Quakers did not hang people for adultery, as did the Puritans, but this was because of a difference in attitudes toward capital punishment rather than toward the crime itself.

For the offenses of sodomy and bestiality, the laws of Pennsylvania ordered single men to be imprisoned for life, and whipped every three months. Married men were ordered to be divorced and castrated. Imperial authorities also disallowed this statute as "unreasonable" and excessively severe. The Quakers were not libertarian in matters of the flesh.

On the question of sex within marriage, Quakers were not of one mind. Some carried their sexual asceticism to the point of condemning all carnal relations between husband and wife. This was actually a prevailing view among Friends in New England for a brief period. When the missionary couple Joseph Nicholson and his wife came to Salem in 1660, they reported that most Quaker couples totally abstained from sexual relations; one couple had done so for four years; others for a year or more. The Quaker Mary Dyer who was hanged at Boston believed in total

celibacy within marriage. This attitude survived among radical Quakers even to the late eighteenth century, and gave rise to a sect of Quaker heretics called Shaking Quakers or simply Shakers, who seceded largely on the question of marital celibacy.

Most Quakers did not believe in celibacy, but many tried to restrain sexual activity within marriage. In 1795 a Quaker named Joshua Evans had an interesting conversation with a Shaker on the morality of sex within marriage. The Shaker declared: "The manner you gratify yourselves with your wives when they are not in a capacity of conception but to gratify your lust is fornication, as it is not for multiplying." To this the Quaker replied:

I told him if others erred they [the Shakers] did on the other hand in forbidding what Christ did not, but taught to leave father and mother and cleave to his wife. And though I did see they were in error, his remarks are worthy of serious thought, that none may abuse that privilege of marriage by gratifying lustful inclinations, with no design of multiplying, and though they carry the matter to an extreme the other way, yet in beholding the sins committed by men and women I do not wonder some are raised up who will not touch women that way. Though I told him the right path lay between us viz. to marry but not to go into her but for propagation and asked if he did not believe the same. He said yea.

That rule of sexual restraint was often carried into practice. Abstinence for extended periods seems to have been common and even normal in Quaker families. Even between husbands and wives, the Quakers urged restraint in the exercise of "animal passions." When English Quaker Robert Dudley married for the third time, he was visited by two Quaker spinsters of advanced age.

He was warned by one of them against too fondly indulging in conjugal delights, lest, (like Sampson formerly) he should lose the means of his strength, whilst reposing in the lap of his Delilah. The other minister felt (or thought that she felt) a like concern for *both*, and my friend assured me, alluded to some things about which they (as old maids) could not have been supposed to know anything. And all this too in the presence of a youth, the son and stepson of the parties! Behind this attitude lay an assumption that sex was sinful in itself, and that a strong physical relationship between a husband and wife threatened to weaken the spiritual foundation of a proper marriage.

Here again the tone was set by William Penn. As early as 1671, when he prepared to marry the beautiful Gulielma Springett, Penn began to be tormented by stirrings of "lust" and "lewd thoughts." To restrain them, he wrote a paper for the men's meeting on the eve of his marriage, in which he prayed that he and his wife "may not give way to the inordinate aboundings of affection, for that dishonors the marriage bed, yea that is a defiled bed, as well as grosser pollutions."

One unintended consequence of this attitude was that Quakers became the first people in Anglo-America who succeeded in controlling fertility within marriage. In the beginning, birth rates were very high in the Delaware Valley. A Welsh Quaker immigrant named Gabriel Thomas observed before 1690 that there was "seldom any young married woman but hath a child in her belly, or one upon her lap." But as early as the mid-eighteenth century---perhaps even earlier---Quakers in the Delaware Valley and also on the island of Nantucket were practicing some method of birth limitation within marriage. How they managed to do so remains unknown, perhaps unknowable. No evidence survives of coitus interruptus in any Quaker family, or contraceptive technology. But much quantitative evidence testifies to a regime of sexual abstinence, single beds, separate rooms and the control of physical contact between husbands and wives.

From an early date, Quakers also encouraged the practices that would be called prudery in the nineteenth century. Quaker meetings carefully monitored female dress and sternly forbade even the slightest hint of sensuality. In 1718 the London yearly meeting went so far as to condemn "naked necks." Ordinary language was carefully purged of carnal connotation. A French traveler in the eighteenth century was startled to discover

that respectable ladies of Pennsylvania could not bring themselves to speak plainly about their bodies even to their physicians, but delicately described everything from neck to waist as their "stomachs," and anything from waist to feet as their "ankles."<sup>14</sup> This prudery had an important function. It lowered the general level of sexual tension in social relationships, even between husbands and wives. The Quakers of the Delaware Valley were very different in that respect from both the New England Puritans and Virginia Anglicans, but very similar to their co-believers in England.

A similar spirit of sexual asceticism was shared by many groups of German Pietists, some of whom practice it to this day. It also became part of the official culture of Philadelphia, which was very different from New York or Baltimore. For many generations, what Digby Baltzell calls "mild sexlessness in the Quaker tradition" set a tone for the sexual ideology of an American region.

---