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David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*
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Michael J. Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire: A New History of the
English Civil Wars* (London, 2008)

The British Atlantic World,
1500–1800

Second edition

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palgrave
macmillan

The study of political power in this social and cultural context raises fundamental questions about the formation and reformulation of identities and communities; about the relationship between material culture and identity and community formation; and about the political significance of these processes. By the same token it offers the possibility of a reawakening of interest in the commercial revolution. Overall, it opens up a very wide agenda for economic, social, and cultural historians. At the margins of civil society people were led to express some of their core values – values that could be taken for granted closer to home. The integration of the history of empire with the history of the state enriches our understanding of both and takes us closer to understanding some influential contemporary presumptions.

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Gender

Sarah M. S. Pearsall

Both the history of gender and the history of the Atlantic world have blossomed as fields of inquiry in the last 30 years, but the relationship between these two subjects remains unclear. Melding them is a profound challenge to historians in both fields. In part there is a need to make Atlantic history more than simply imperial history in a new guise. Rather, for the history of the Atlantic to be as wide-ranging as the Atlantic world itself, it is requisite that Atlantic history meets the challenge of gender. The place of gender – that is, the social and cultural categorization of sexual difference – in this world needs to be understood, as do other questions about cultural values, behaviors, and the organization of power at levels both large and small. Equally, gender historians can benefit from the more expansive, multinational approach offered by Atlantic history, placing broad changes into more precise contexts and replacing outmoded narratives of improvement or decline with more complex models of change and continuity.

Beliefs about gender shaped the nature of English colonization and indeed the British Atlantic world itself. At the moment of England's founding of its permanent Atlantic colonies, gender roles and behaviors were under significant scrutiny. In the 'crisis of order' that occurred in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, those individuals who challenged traditional gender roles caused concern among authorities. Since the traditional household, 'the little commonwealth', was the basis for the order of society and government, disorder within the household was an indicator that the times were 'out of joint'.¹ Political and social pressures directed

at the most intimate functioning of the household, from the cuckolding of a husband to the shrewishness of a wife, generated much more fluid boundaries between what we consider to be the public and the private. To instill order into the household was to lay the basis for a stable and godly society. Debates over the nature of women and their status further manifested the conflicts present in England itself as authorities reached across the Irish Sea and the Atlantic to colonize alien peoples.

To combat disorder, in the guise of those termed scolds, witches, or savages, English and later British authorities directed anxious attention at their gender regimes. In a bid to establish order in places seen by the English authorities as disturbingly disorderly, gender relations continued to be, as they had been in England itself, emblems of larger societal order. As an assertive but nervous metropolitan government reached into geographic areas previously held by other European powers and by native authorities, the gender order worked as an emblem of the way in which the English could settle themselves and govern over new areas. To export traditional English gender roles and household structures to the new colonies was a critical part of achieving colonial success, at least once it became clear that quick routes to gold and spices were not to be found.

At the same time, differing systems of gender organization among alien people provided the English with evidence of their inferiority and ultimately of their 'need' for colonization. Part of the 'improvement' of these different peoples lay in their adoption of English gender norms. Just as magistrates and communities in England patrolled the boundaries of acceptable behavior, so too colonial and metropolitan authorities attempted to regulate the households and sexualities of subject and settler populations alike. The perceived gender and household inadequacies of non-English peoples provided one of the strongest justifications for English colonial expansion and also for slavery. Within England and later Britain itself, the gender order of the other people with whom the British had come into contact became a way of measuring them, and of signifying British superiority. Confident in their avoidance of the tyranny of polygamy or the 'female governments' of African and Native American nations, the English and later the British and British-Americans felt themselves superior to peoples who had revealed themselves to have committed failures of the grossest natures in their gender order.

Finally, the presence and occupations of English women became a vital means of measuring the settled status of the

colonies established by the English. As the Lord Deputy of Ireland declared in the 1620s, to 'make a good nation ... it is noe great matter of wha[t] nation the men bee soe the women bee Englishe'.² The presence of English and later British women allowed for the smooth transmission of property, language, and custom; they also bolstered proper household structures.³ In metropolitan eyes, colonies did not become civilized when there were only English men there; they only truly did so when English women were there too. Those colonies that mirrored metropolitan gender and household orders became more quickly those colonies that made claims to a settled and in some cases a national status. Those areas with a demographic imbalance in the sex ratio and those areas in which English men turned to native Irish or American or African partners were considered not to have achieved the same level of civility as England itself. Those societies that were unable to replicate traditional structures of marriage and family were never counted as true 'homes' for the English settlers there. In part, liaisons between English men and native women were dangerous not only for their implications for the social and racial order, but also because they too closely approximated those of England's Catholic enemies, Spain and France. In order to distinguish themselves both from their European foes and from 'savage' Irish, Native American, and African peoples, the English sought to maintain traditional household structures. Likewise, those areas where English women were forced to perform 'men's' labor were considered potentially barbarous, as such problematic systems of labor organization threatened to undermine traditional English social order.

In these ways, then, it should be clear that gender was central to the way in which a British Atlantic world was created. At the same time, transatlantic currents shaped gender orders throughout this world. Adopting an Atlantic approach to the history of gender illuminates both the history of gender and the history of the British Atlantic world. It allows for a more concise understanding of points of change, so that causes and effects can be more easily pinpointed. That gender relations changed between 1600 and 1800 is obvious, but how and why they did so is a much more hotly contested question. Taking a multinational perspective allows historians to determine which factors might have been relevant in any given change in gender dynamics. It also helps them to avoid simplistic models of improvement or declension. This brief overview necessarily simplifies and smoothes out the vast and vibrant variety within the British

Atlantic world, but in focusing on broad changes and continuities, local patterns should then be clearer.

Starting points

In 1600 Elizabeth I ruled England. She had come to the throne because the system of hereditary monarchy in England, like most monarchies, privileged blood over sex in determining who should rule the nation. However, her presence on the throne did not mean that gender and sexuality were not of considerable importance to her subjects. Indeed, her virginal status was requisite to her rule. After all, had she married, it would have meant that England would have fallen under the sway of a foreign power. During and after her reign there was a heated pamphlet campaign on the nature of women and their authority.⁴ Misogynist tracts such as Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615) met replies in works such as Ester Sowernam's *Ester Hath Hang'd Haman* (1617). The anti-woman pamphlets argued that women had far too much authority, and that they used those powers to seduce, to scold, and to nurse their own vanity. In part, these female powers were thought to be verbal and sexual. Swetnam pronounced flatly that women 'are ungrateful, perjured, full of fraud, flouting and deceit, unconstant ... proud, discourteous and cruel'.⁵ The pro-woman pamphlets argued against these claims, declaring to a presumed female audience: 'You are women: in Creation, noble; in Redemption, gracious; in use, most blessed'.⁶ These literary debates were inaccessible, most likely, to the majority of English women (and indeed a number of men). Nonetheless, the issues they crystallized – about women's use of authority and their possibly malevolent and simultaneously seductive powers, about men's potential weakness in the face of fearsome women – mirrored and were mirrored in thousands of less well-recorded debates in which individual women and men debated each other's roles, responsibilities, and failings.

In theory it was the male head of household, backed up by communal and legal authority, who was expected to monitor the behavior of his family and also of his servants. Of course, this theoretical model did not always work in practice. Even in theory it was not a rigid system; for instance, there was room for widows to gain economic and social authority and to hold property, especially among the elite.⁷ Nonetheless, the household was at the center of the social order, especially since the Reformation had dissolved any

alternatives in the form of convents or monasteries.⁸ At marriage, a woman became *feme covert*, that is, subsumed under her husband's legal identity. Most people, although by no means all, married. Accordingly, both masculine and feminine identities depended to a large degree on this adult setting up of household. Although a minimum of 10 percent of the population never married, with that number rising to approximately 20 percent in times of economic hardship, those who did marry tended to have relatively large families.⁹ In general, men were the providers and women the helpmeets. Sometimes, as in the workshop of the London artisan Nehemiah Wallington, the wife would help in the running of a household workshop or household farm.¹⁰ Many men served as apprentices in order to learn the trade that would allow them some day to set up their own household; independence was a prime goal for men.¹¹ Many women worked as servants in other households, acquiring useful housewifely skills. Some also served as midwives, tavern keepers, and shopkeepers, especially when widowed.

It is vital to acknowledge that although the system was patriarchal in its orientation, it was not only men who assigned roles to women. From the whispered endearments between a husband and a wife to the shouted insults that might drag embittered individuals into courts on slander charges, men and women constantly defined each other's positions and roles. Indeed, in many slander cases men accused men and women accused women. By and large, men sued over charges relating to their honesty in business dealings or their ability to regulate their households, so that they might go to court after being described as 'knives' or 'cuckolds'. Women tended to sue for slander relating to their sexual honor. At this time it was considered acceptable and in fact desirable for women to experience sexual pleasure in marriage, in part because conception was thought to depend on both female and male orgasm. Authors of midwifery manuals often acknowledged 'a delightful and mutual Itch in the Parts of Men and Women'.¹² Nonetheless, women's sexuality was to be confined to marriage, and their sexual reputations were carefully monitored. In 1625, when one Ellen Tillsbury shouted to her neighbor, 'hang thee whore thou keepest a bawdy house', the neighbor sued for slander.¹³ Such slander cases were common in this period, and they indicate the extent to which communities themselves, as well as legal authorities, defined gender roles and behaviors.¹⁴

In this same era, from roughly 1560 to 1640, there was a 'crisis of order', in which there was considerable economic dislocation,

population increase, land shortages, inflation, and increased poverty and vagrancy. Fewer people could afford to marry and set up households. There thus appears to have been a rise in illegitimacy, and prosecutions for this crime increased in these years as well.¹⁵ This situation led to a more general anxiety about deviance and disorder, some of it based on gender behaviors. Indeed, some historians have gone so far as to identify 'a crisis in gender relations' in the years around 1600.¹⁶ It is certainly true that in these years there were significant prosecutions for sexual crimes such as illegitimacy and for social crimes such as scolding and witchcraft, for which women were disproportionately targeted. Both women and men were accused of behavior that breached the public peace, but for women to be 'disorderly' or 'unruly' was particularly worrisome.¹⁷

It was in this context of rising economic and social uncertainty that English colonization projects began in earnest. The English had of course been involved in exploration, trade, and colonization in the Atlantic basin for at least a century, but it was in this critical era that permanent outposts became fully fledged colonies in Ireland, Virginia, New England, and Barbados. Therefore concern with the gender order, and with the need for stable married households to underpin the new societies, became a dominant motif in English settlement. Alien groups would be measured by their ability to conform to English gender orders, and settler societies would also be measured by these standards. Changes would come throughout the British Atlantic, but these changes could be characterized neither as improvements nor as declines, or what an earlier historiography identified variously as 'golden ages', 'universal oppression', and 'separate spheres'.¹⁸

The limited analytical purchase afforded by these historiographical models has more recently led scholars to eschew these narratives, replacing them with a more complex and variegated view of change. In part, taking an Atlantic point of view can help to pinpoint moments of transition. Certain shifts were regional or national, while others were transatlantic. The relative importance of factors can also be weighed with greater precision. Such an approach also allows historians to see how wider patterns interacted with local circumstances and took on new forms. Numerous changes affected the entire British Atlantic, but they did so in different ways, at different times, and among different people. Nonetheless, to be able to appreciate the unique trajectories of individuals, communities, and even nations, it is vital to have a sense of larger transatlantic changes in the realm of gender frontiers, the

movement of people and goods, and shifting cultures of refinement, literacy, and Enlightenment.

Gender frontiers

Without the expansion of the English into Ireland and later into the Americas, this British Atlantic world would not have come to be. Conquest and colonization created significant 'gender frontiers', defined by Kathleen Brown as 'the meeting of two or more culturally specific systems of knowledge about gender and nature'.¹⁹ Just as gender and household order had signified social soundness in England itself, so too would they continue as emblems for larger social and colonial stability. In part, English colonial views were hammered out in Ireland, in the realm of gender as elsewhere. English authorities there were eager to prevent the largely male population of settlers from intermingling with native women reckoned by the English to be barbarous and even dangerous. Edmund Spenser even asked his readers 'how can such matching but bring forth an evil race?'²⁰ In the uncertain settlements the English forged in Ireland there was also a concern that Irish wives would prove treacherous. One English commentator complained that such women 'lye in the bosomes of ore greate men, to maintaine the cutting of ore throats'.²¹ The English insistence on their male settlers staying away from native women, a tendency absent in much of the Spanish and French colonial enterprise, almost certainly had its source in the damp and difficult Gaelic experience. Gender regimes came into play in the earliest English colonial ventures.

When the English later encountered Native Americans, they felt that their superiority, and their right to the land held by the indigenous people, was partly tied to the correctness of their system of gender. According to the English, because Indian men did not till their fields and control the sexuality of their women, they were open to colonization. They lacked the 'manliness' the English held so dear, and thus they could be considered weaker, in need of both aid and conquest. In addition, their household organization, at variance with English ideals, if not practices, of matrimony, was another reason for the English to look upon natives with disfavor. In New England, for instance, many Native American nations allowed for easier divorce, at the instigation of either partner, and they did not necessarily condemn multiple partners. The English viewed such configurations with horror, and considered their eradication part of the civilizing and Christianizing process.²²

The fact that many indigenous cultures were matrilineal augmented the English sense that the natives lacked proper understanding of patriarchal and patrilineal systems of descent and property ownership, and so the English could render their 'superiority' in gendered terms. Barbarism in part depended on unacceptable configurations of gender. Such discussions continued to inform English and later British and American thinking, into the Scottish Enlightenment and beyond. So David Hume, for instance, pronounced that 'Barbarous nations display superiority, by reducing their females to the most abject slavery ... But the male sex, among a polite people, discover their authority in a more generous, though not a less evident manner; by civility, by respect, by complaisance, and, in a word, by gallantry'.²³ Such comparisons served Britons and British-Americans with a means of 'discovering their authority' in the face of alien cultures. In Adam Ferguson's stadial theories, in which societies moved from savage to barbarous to polished to corrupt, the matrilineality of Native Americans proved their location at the lowest stage of development: that of the 'savage'.²⁴ In these views, more advanced nations proved their civility by their organization along patrilineal and indeed patriarchal lines. Relations between men and women were a vital way of measuring the distance between barbarous and civilized. Polygamy, for instance, was universally derided as an inferior system of partnership, associated with cultures lacking the civility of Europe. In his *History of the American Indians* (1775), James Adair detailed a marriage between a French man and an Indian woman that foundered due to the woman's apparent infidelity.²⁵ Adair used this marital failure as evidence that the matrilineal and matriarchal systems of the natives, 'that wanton female government', were unreliable, and that alliances made with them could not be trusted. In joining with them, Europeans were placing their manhood in a precarious position indeed.

For their part, many native groups equally considered the English lacking in terms of their gender organization. English men worked in the fields, and hence performed what was accounted 'women's work' in many native societies, thus indicating the effeminacy and powerlessness of English men 'for their folly in spoiling good working creatures', according to an early New England commentator. It also demonstrated the laziness and ineptitude of English women. That same New England commentator reported a case in which an Indian sachem reacted with shocked horror to the scolding of an Englishman by his wife, the sachem thus concluding

that the Englishman 'was a great fool to give her the audience and no correction for usurping his character and abusing him by her tongue'.²⁶ The fact that English men did not hunt as frequently as native men also signified their inability to provide properly. An Englishman's seeming preference for a single marriage partner might also be suspect. Native systems of gender organization sometimes lay uneasily submerged under British colonial rule, rising to the surface of written records only occasionally. Despite the imbalance in written sources it is clear that, in these gender frontiers, each side saw disorder where the other side saw order, and this sense of disorder caused problems for each side and for their interactions with each other.

These 'gender frontiers' could also be 'sexual middle grounds'.²⁷ After all, the colonial world was full of European men and their Native American wives, and there were general concerns about the relations, sexual and otherwise, between Europeans and natives. The English did not join with non-English in the same numbers as French and Spanish settlers and traders did, but there were many partnerships nonetheless. Metropolitan English authorities did not monitor their settlers as much as French and Spanish governments did, nor did they encourage the marriages and conversion of natives with anything like the same fervor. Still there were sexual and indeed marital relations between English and Native Americans, just as there had been relations between English and Irish and as there would be such relations later between English and Africans. British and British-American authorities felt that localities with high numbers of such unions existed in the wilderness, and were therefore not part of the civilized worlds of the colonial project.

In part, early English settlers were uneasily aware of their own failures to replicate metropolitan gender models. In many colonial ventures, especially in their origins, English men outnumbered women significantly, and this configuration worried metropolis and colony alike. Among the more obvious examples are sixteenth-century Ireland, seventeenth-century Virginia, and eighteenth-century Jamaica.²⁸ In these regimes there were relatively few Englishwomen but an abundance of young men. These configurations were not conducive to a sense of household or, therefore, of social stability. English women allowed for the rightful transmission of property within legitimate marriages; they also passed on language and culture to their children. Areas in which English and later British men had difficulty in finding similar women as partners, or in which they chose other women, could never count as

entirely civilized in metropolitan eyes, whatever institutional and legal growth occurred there.

Despite metropolitan distaste, relationships between colonizing and native populations continued throughout this era, especially as the British adopted African chattel slavery as the bedrock of their first empire. European men's impressions of female African bodies, viewed as both sexual and monstrous, provided a justification for slavery, since African women were linked with both productive and reproductive capacities.²⁹ For Edward Long, an infamous historian of Jamaica, the 'hot temperament' of African women provided solid justification for their enslavement. Similarly, the 'taste for women' among African men was further proof of their inability to make progress in civility, thus implying that it was fair to enslave them.³⁰ At the same time, gendered systems of labor in various West African regions meant that women were often exported as slaves in high numbers, especially from areas such as the Bight of Biafra, where their labor was considered less critical.³¹

Even regions with relatively few slaves, such as Britain and New England, were deeply implicated in the structures created by a British Atlantic slave trade. In part, shifting cultures of refinement meant that it became increasingly unacceptable for English women to perform field work. Indeed, that the English considered field work unacceptable for Anglo-American women but acceptable for African-American ones meant that gender beliefs also influenced the adoption and structure of slavery. African women were imported along with men into the English colonies, and were put to work in tobacco, sugar, and rice fields. In part, the willingness of the English to put African women to work in fields meant that slavery was adopted more quickly than it might otherwise have been.³²

Gender beliefs influenced the adoption and shape of African chattel slavery, but equally slavery reshaped gender relations in the British Atlantic. Many British settlers in the West Indies, for instance, fretted that African mores, especially those involving unmarried sexuality, would rub off on British settlers (which indeed they sometimes did). These fears were especially pronounced in the eighteenth century.³³ There were worries that the British in islands like Jamaica would contaminate themselves by their proximity, both physical and emotional, to the different systems of gender and sexual organization of the Africans who surrounded them. In part, that the British departed from metropolitan norms in adopting local systems of gender organization, in which non-legal unions replaced legal ones, was one of the reasons

that the British Creole became such a questionable character in metropolitan eyes. The refusal of British men in Jamaica to marry British women but instead to form attachments with African and African-American women undermined the system of marriage, and its concomitant gender roles, and thus threatened the stability of the entire colonial enterprise. Furthermore, the children of these unions could not be counted on as defenders of Britain, and might instead rise up in rebellion. Such sexual middle grounds within slavery altered gender roles and also meant that again the presence or absence of English or British women remained a key variable in understandings of social stability.

In addition, slavery extended the lines of authority inherent in master-servant relations by giving owners the power of life and death over slaves and their children and the economic benefits of offspring produced by female slaves. This was a horrific combination for slave women and men, in that the power of ownership was inserted into reproduction. The inherited nature of chattel slavery meant that intimate matters of sexuality and reproduction were put into a distinctive socio-economic framework. It also meant that slavery descended through the mother, creating an anomalous and unfortunate matrilineality in the British colonies. Slave women suffered from sexual attention from owners.³⁴ Slave men lost much of the power to monitor their own households, a serious blow to their masculine identities.

Not all masters, of course, were men. Women too could rule slaves with whips.³⁵ However, the juxtaposition of the growth of African chattel slavery concurrently with the rise of transatlantic cultures of refinement meant that these mistresses, whatever brutality they might have inflicted, came to define themselves as 'ladies' in contrast to the African-American (and Native) 'wenches' who surrounded them. That 'wenches' could perform field work and were considered by many to be sexually available meant that they were further to be distinguished from 'ladies'. In the British American colonies, race was superimposed on class in unforeseen and pernicious ways.

The movement of goods and ideas

Slavery became critical to a British empire that depended on trade goods and on a triangular trade between Britain, the mainland colonies and the British West Indies. In fact, the British Atlantic was developed on the basis of the movement of goods and people, and

its shape was strongly determined by its trade and labor systems. There were two major shifts in this realm that had effects on gender organization. British and British-American women seem on the whole to have become less involved in the productive work of their husbands. That is, in household workshops earlier in the era the wife was a helpmeet in the business as well as the home, and she might be fully aware of the details of the business. By the end of this period, wives tended to know less about the running of the business, as the business increasingly separated from the household. The labor of these women was thus directed differently. While these changes affected women in all parts of the Atlantic world, they did so in distinct ways. Elite women had greater access to consumer goods, while slave women were caught in an expanding plantation system. Rural women in the British Isles increasingly participated in outwork production, while farm women in British colonies became household manufacturers. Overall, however, there was also an increase in the consumer powers of both women and men and a decline in the numbers of household workshops.³⁶

Despite this decline, such venues could retain strength in some areas. Indeed, in the later eighteenth century Benjamin Franklin termed his wife 'a good & faithful Helpmate, [who] assisted me much by attending the Shop'.³⁷ It has been all too easy for economic historians to focus exclusively on the contributions of men to building an Atlantic world. In part, they have been sustained in this orientation by the records that men have left, created in business but also in sources as diverse as family letters and autobiographies. But the labor of women, as wives, as mothers, as servants, was critical to the creation of citizens of the world like Franklin. To understand the integrative workings that depended on the productive and consumer choices of both men and women is to recapture the complexity of a world that was hardly built or sustained exclusively by men. On the other hand, it is equally critical to recognize the disproportionately gendered nature of the Atlantic economic links, and the strains that its workings placed on men. British Atlantic men's identities were intimately connected with their ability to prosper and to achieve independence, and the uncertainties of a more global economy brought with them attendant anxiety.³⁸ British and British-American fathers tried to raise boys who could withstand these pressures and be masters of businesses, households, and selves.

In part, the regulation of the self was a central aspect of the rise of cultures of refinement. Correspondingly, the massive growth of

trade contributed to the availability of luxury and other goods. The material worlds of the British Atlantic were utterly transformed, and cultures of politeness became increasingly important for middling and elite sorts.³⁹ 'Ladies' might gain leverage from new discourses of refinement, and they often may have gained tools for negotiating with male family members. These shifts gave new spaces for homosociability, such as coffee houses for men and tea tables for women (although tea tables could often include men too). Middling and elite identities as ladies and gentlemen depended on newer models of refinement and sensibility. Not all elite women characterized these changes in positive ways. For all the women who took up their teacups and embroidery and who wittily discussed the most recent issue of the *London Magazine*, there were some, like Esther Edwards Burr, who in 1756 lamented the loss of the older ways and more traditional housewifely apprenticeships, now that 'our young women are all Ladies, and it is beneath them to go out'.⁴⁰

Men, too, felt the call and the tensions of newer models of behavior and deportment.⁴¹ Refinement in the American colonies bolstered not only gender and class status, but also proved that colonials had not departed too wildly from metropolitan norms. At the same time, the lack of aristocrats in the colonies meant that gentlemanly status could not depend so strongly on lineage. While the ideal of the polite gentleman may have united Britain and its colonies, it took distinct forms in different places. For instance, Jamaican elite men felt less call to adhere to the dictates of polite sociability such as literary salons or coffee houses. Nevertheless, they were determined to provide abundant hospitality to visitors to their plantations, a different and in some ways more archaic vision of politeness.⁴² Indeed, metropolitan visitors were often revolted by the displays of food and drink in the warm climates of the Caribbean. Lady Maria Nugent, an English sojourner in Jamaica in the earliest years of the nineteenth century, grumbled to an English friend of one party in which 'there were 36 Dishes ... in broiling hot weather ... Nothing can be more disgusting'.⁴³ For Nugent, planter politeness was a lower and less pleasant version of the metropolitan refinement she held so dear. Other metropolitan sojourners in Jamaica derided it for its lack of refinement, a situation partially attributed to the relatively low numbers of elite British women.

Despite local and national variations, it is clear that cultures of refinement became increasingly important for an ever-wider swath of the population in the British Atlantic world. At the same time, sensibility, defined here as the ability to possess and display a feeling

heart, developed critical impetus by the later eighteenth century.⁴⁴ The discourse of sensibility could serve to increase women's authority, in that they might make claims to greater sensibility and might monitor men's ability to display sensibility in such critical periods as courtship. At the same time, if sensibility was associated too much with emotion and the nerves, women might be thought to exist outside the realm of reason and masculine vigor. As with refinement, it could also signal differences in terms of race and class, so that only certain populations were included in a circle of sensibility.

These newer cultures of refinement and sensibility depended, obviously, on vast increases in literacy and the rise of print culture, which had similarly varied effects on gender configurations. Literacy rose dramatically in this era, for men but especially for women, the vast majority of whom were illiterate in the sixteenth century.⁴⁵ The rise of literacy was especially dramatic in the eighteenth century. Literacy and greater access to print culture could have liberating aspects for women, and many scholars have focused on the ability of women to shape lives and selves based on printed models.⁴⁶ Books, magazines, and newspapers, which became more widely circulated throughout the British Atlantic world, could open up new perspectives. Whereas family and community stories, injunctions, and gossip, with courts and churches adding their voices, had been the central forms of communication for most in the sixteenth century, now there was a multiplicity of voices. Some of these voices, however, often purveyed the same traditional gender roles and stories, and did not serve any especially liberating purposes. Novels, although a new form, often stressed older ideas of female purity, the dangers of seduction, the dangers of foppishness, and the place for submissive women. Moreover, literacy did not affect all worlds equally. Many non-British groups such as Native Americans and Africans were left out of these developments in large degree, as were some of the poorest individuals in Britain and its colonies.

Certainly, however, more people could not only read and thereby gain access to an ever-burgeoning world of print but, increasingly, they could also write. Again, there were considerable variations based on class, race, and age, but by and large more and more individuals gained access to writing, both in the skills and in the tools (such as quills, ink, and paper) needed for it. Diaries, commonplace books, and letters became more widely accessible, especially to women. These forms of communication, in addition to the many needed for trade and business, could provide useful social and personal outlets and means of negotiating selves and relationships.

Scholars have tended to see these new abilities as liberating, but they could sometimes serve conservative purposes.⁴⁷ The variation in their dissemination meant that if they provided authority, they provided it disproportionately to those who already possessed it to some degree. Still, they did alter the parameters for performances of gender and other identities. Increasingly, by the end of this era, women such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Judith Sargent Murray were entering the world of print to demand better education and greater rights for women.⁴⁸ No longer was the production of print the province only of men and the occasional aristocratic woman.

Print culture also gave impetus to the shift in ideas known collectively as the Enlightenment. Although the Enlightenment of course had many facets and indeed many definitions, it could safely be stated that an improving and classifying impulse lay at its core. Many individuals adopted the larger eighteenth-century concerns for improvement, classification, and control. Even in his older years, one ambitious, acquisitive and improving Jamaican planter ruefully noted, 'instead of indulging in bed & nursing my [gout], I must crawl on Horseback & be doing something'.⁴⁹ This restless drive always to 'be doing something', even at some personal cost, was a central product of the civilizing process, although it may have had its roots in what has been termed the Protestant work ethic. It meant an increase in reform movements and what would come to be called 'the humanitarian revolution', but it also meant an increase in repressive control, counting, tabulating, and surveillance.⁵⁰ In addition, those who surveyed and tabulated, usually men, might wield disproportionate influence. Moreover, many Enlightenment thinkers drew significant contrasts between the savage and the civilized, and gender orders became a way of signifying this gulf. To classify was to lend authority to certain categories of peoples. In part, this desire to understand 'the science of man' had its roots in the expansion of Europe and a desire to make sense of alien peoples. It was at this moment that many intellectuals fixed racial difference in the body.⁵¹

A few also fixed sexual differences there too, or at least gave weight to the biological basis for social differences between men and women. As theorists sought to explain the mechanism of human reproduction, there was a decline in the ancient Galenic view that there was, in essence, only one sex, and that women's reproductive organs were merely an inverse, and therefore inferior, version of men's. The eighteenth century witnessed a new emphasis on the notion that women and men were in fact two different sexes. This process occurred concurrently with a diminishing sense

that female orgasm was requisite for conception, so that uteruses became passive vessels for vital fluids from the male. These views, while limited in their reach, would ultimately reshape the way in which gender, the social category of difference, would come to depend highly on the physical differences thought to exist between men and women.⁵² Such visions would ultimately reinforce older notions of the weak female and give impetus to the idea that a woman's identity was tied to her reproductive capacities. Such is not to say that there had not long been arguments in favor of female inferiority, but these new scientific understandings altered the terms of this debate from purely social theories to theories that combined the physical and the social in ever more particular ways. Indeed, it might be said that the Atlantic moment brought with it new ways of implicating the body in social and cultural difference, in ways that would define the modern western world.

Change and continuity

It should be clear that these sorts of changes affected all of the British Atlantic world, even if they did so differently depending on timing, location, and population. This Atlantic perspective can help illuminate even those classic issues of religious participation and the republican redefinition of citizenship. Martin Luther's original notion of the 'priesthood of all believers' was taken more literally by some Protestant denominations than others. At the more radical edges, groups such as the Society of Friends, founded in the seventeenth century, took this idea to mean that every believer communicated directly with God, without any priestly intermediaries. The implications of these beliefs obviously altered the possibilities for women and religion, as there were now no male priests to preside over the communion of believers. Most visibly, Quaker women preached throughout the British Atlantic world, often to the consternation of non-Quakers.⁵³ The great revivals and awakenings of the eighteenth century, which again linked the British Atlantic world, also gave more visibility to the laity. In this sense, women and other groups who held little institutional authority might find a certain kind of authority in religion. The revivals also gave impetus to the development of further Protestant denominations such as the Methodists and the Baptists. While these groups were often founded in a bout of radical religious enthusiasm, this situation did not always translate into radical gender configurations, as in the case of the

Quakers. Rather, as these groups became more institutionalized they tended also to grow more traditional in their gender patterns, as exemplified by the Baptists in New England.⁵⁴ Religious radicalism thus did not always equate to gender radicalism, even as access to religious authority shifted and opened up in new ways throughout the British Atlantic.⁵⁵

A similar trajectory characterized political changes. Certainly, the settings of war and revolution presented new opportunities for women to organize for patriotic efforts, even if in highly traditional ways, as in the spinning bees of the American Revolution.⁵⁶ Equally, while times of revolution in the British Atlantic led to the increase of voices demanding radical changes in all areas, they also inspired conservative backlashes, in the Restoration era and in the early American republic. Indeed, such post-revolutionary moments could lead to even greater emphasis on traditional gender roles. Equally, the contractual models of government that so informed the American Revolution meant that while middling to elite white men gained new powers, they may have done so to the exclusion of women. Many of these ideas had their origins in British political theories, and in fact the early republican obsession with 'virtue' also had British origins.⁵⁷ In the new United States, women were excluded from the contract between the state and the individual. That is, whereas the older system had, albeit uneasily, allowed women access to the highest powers in the land as queens, the newer system did not. In this era, except for a brief period in New Jersey, women could neither vote nor obtain political office. Elite white women still retained certain leverage, whether as 'republican mothers', 'republican wives' or indeed as players in the political contests of the capitols.⁵⁸ But although they might have been 'Republican Queens' like Dolley Madison, they could never be true queens with the legal and personal authority of a woman like Elizabeth I.⁵⁹

Changes then were rife, but there were at least some continuities. After all, the desire to insist upon and even legislate for order, within the most intimate relations between women and men, had long marked out the parameters of English authority. The Atlantic moment reinforced these longstanding concerns and gave them a variety of new shapes, but the impulse to find in gender relations a model and a mirror for other kinds of social order remained the same. There was a desire to regulate, from the broadest institutional structures to the most minute anatomy of the individual. There were new axes of authority as the English and then the British reached out and created a British Atlantic, but the desire

for an orderly gender organization to underpin an orderly society provided a critical impulse throughout this era.

In addition, the household remained a central arena for the definition and enactment of gender roles. During this time, British and British-American men and women defined their adult gender status in terms of their ability to begin and to run an orderly household. There were of course exceptions, but the ideal of the independent household headed by husband and wife was a central one throughout the British Atlantic world. For British and British-American men, to achieve financial independence was a key variable in setting up a household, choosing a partner, and starting a family. For British Atlantic women, marriage would remain 'the important crisis, upon which our Fate depends'.⁶⁰ With limited birth control, most women would then devote themselves to the demands and joys of childbearing and – rearing. Moreover, beliefs in women's inferiority, whether social, theological, legal, or biological, remained constant, even as they took different forms. It was a legacy that would haunt later generations.

Integrating gender into the history of the British Atlantic thus reveals the complex formulation of authority for scales both large and small. Ideas about gender and its practices were vital to the ways in which individuals and societies defined themselves and others. A scolding English wife in New England in the early seventeenth century was a concern both to her own English community and to the Native Americans who shared her world. The presence of English women and legal marriages marked out some parts of the British Atlantic world as more 'civilized' than others, at least in English eyes. Colonial power depended on the social stability that such households were thought to provide. In short, there could be no settled empires without the right kinds of households. To lose sight of these households and the individuals who populated them is to miss a critical aspect of the British Atlantic world. Moving outwards from the household to the vast transoceanic shifts, however, also helps historians to be aware of the sway of broader trends as well as the force of local and individual trajectories.

To attend to the complex intermingling of ideals and practices of gender within a larger British Atlantic world is to insist upon a more complete history of the British Atlantic world. At the same time, it is also to recall that that history depends on the multiplicity of individual narratives. While certain trends united the British Atlantic, others separated its regions and populations. An awareness of general trends can help to illuminate the particular trajectories

of individuals, families, localities, and nations. The variegated options, contexts, and responses involved in these myriad Atlantic contacts can be fruitfully explored via this perspective. In looking at the tangle of relationships and structures in a smaller setting, it is then possible to generate larger arguments about gender and cultural change.

After all, these shifts did not have wholly positive or negative effects. They form neither a whiggish path to progress, nor a waning of robust early modern opportunities. Separate spheres and golden ages have little place in a British Atlantic history of gender. Rather, a complex concatenation of changes altered landscapes and lives in ways sometimes positive and sometimes negative. If diminishing community intervention meant freedom in some cases for some individuals, it also meant the diminution of the authority of midwives and goodwives who were no longer called by courts to provide authoritative testimony. If the rise of consumerism and trade goods meant greater choices for some, it also meant a shift in labor organization that was damaging for others, especially those caught in the slave system upon which this growth depended. If the rise of literacy and print culture provided liberating new spaces for the self and the imagination, they did so only for certain populations. At the same time they could also serve conservative ends and emphasize old stories about the need for female purity or manly honesty.

The cruel interposition of race and class also affected the story. 'Ladies' and 'gentlemen' won the leisure to participate in newer cultures of print, refinement, and sensibility on the backs of servants and slaves. Margaret Cowper, an elite British-American girl whose letters demonstrate her absorption of the ideals of sensibility and refinement, wrote to her cousin from a Georgia plantation in the late 1790s, complaining of a recent bout of illness. Cowper casually remarked that, as she was recovering, she had gone into the parlor to amuse herself with the harpsichord 'while my Bed was Making'.⁶¹ Cowper's syntax elided the labor of the slave woman who made up her sickbed, and who had undoubtedly been nursing her through her illness. Her unthinking reliance on a slave woman indicates vividly the variety of experiences of different sorts of women and men, all of whom built and sustained this British Atlantic world, as well as the ways in which some 'gains' required some 'losses'.