Issue 1.3 “Was the Colonial Period a ‘Golden Age’ for Women?”

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Women have often been left out of history as important figures because they have not commanded armies or been president, which has led to a lack of in-depth research on the role of women in shaping America. It is largely debated among historians about, “Was the Colonial Period a ‘Golden Age’ for Women in America,” and many people have differing opinions on the subject, like Gloria Main and Mary Beth Norton. Main, author of “Gender, Work, and Wages in Colonial New England,” argues that the Colonial Period did give women a high status in which they were valued for their labor and they even received high wages when entering the workforce. Contrary to Main’s belief, Norton, author of “The Myth of the Golden Age,” argues that women of any race lacked any power in status and did not have the same opportunities as men in the economic and political fields.

Main argues that women had the same opportunities as men when it came to economic and social standings. Most people would think that women would simply stay at home and do chores or sew clothing, but in the colonial period there was not a large market for clothing and there was not a lot to take care of within the homes. New England predominately focused on farming and instead of doing intensive labor in the fields, women would grow herbs and vegetables that could be sold to nearby stores, which resulted in an economic opportunity where women could earn their own wages. Women would even help do farm work with men and this is because work was not differentiated by “what was deemed culturally appropriate to one sex,” but instead by the physical capabilities of a person (44).

Jobs that were supposedly designated for men were still open to women, like how a woman could be a doctor or work in retail, which was because the boundaries that separated work “were permeable” (45). Men often did more weaving than women, but there were still many women invested in the field and they made the same amount of money as men for what they made, even if it was somewhat simpler than a man’s design. Women were also credited when they did excellent work, like in one man’s account book it praised the work of women who tied onions together before they were sold, which shows that women’s accomplishments were not forgotten by society and that other people took notice of their precise work.

After the Seven Year’s War occurred, the economy of New England began to rapidly thrive and the quick growth drew “more women into the paid labor force and. . . a rise in their wages, which no doubt helped attract them,” (47). Women were also being better educated and learned how to conduct business, which gave women the sense that they had “greater control over their own lives,” (47). New England developed into a society that presented many different economic opportunities to women and allowed them to discover their place within the social order of colonial America.

Norton argues that opportunities for women were severely limited for women in America as most of their daily lives occurred within the home and there were few opportunities open to them. The life of white women focused on household tasks that could be small or large in number, but, in addition to daily chores, they had to take care of the children, tend to animals, and take care of food preservation. Many Native American women also had a lot of the same responsibilities within their villages as the men were often away hunting, so they had to tend to the children and gardens. African women’s lives were controlled by “the type of household in which they lived” as a more urban home would have a simple designated task of cooking where a small home would have multiple jobs of taking care of the cooking, the fields, and the children.

Women in America might have had some power, but it was not very significant or long-lasting. When women first came to America there was a very imbalanced ratio of women to men, so women could have some power in marriage as men could not run a successful household by themselves; however, most of these women would get married so young that “it is highly unlikely that they had much say about the choice of a spouse,” (49). Even if women earned money by sewing clothes or selling vegetables it is unlikely that it was enough to be able to take control of the household away from the husband. In addition, if a woman’s husband died before she did, then the land would most likely go to the children instead of transferring to the woman.

Historians often only look at the lives of white women when studying colonial America instead of also expanding on the lives of female slaves. The lives of white women were difficult, but the lives of female slaves were considerably worse as they had to perform grueling labor on plantations and sometimes their masters would take advantage of their female slaves to reproduce as “any child of a slave woman was also a slave” (51). Even if black women wanted to leave their masters by running away, they could not as they had children to take care of that would not be able to make such a dangerous journey. Life for all races of women was difficult in America as they had little control over their own lives and they always had to acknowledge that they came second to men.

Women faced many different challenges in coming to America, but Main and Norton differ in whether they believe that colonial America presented women with an opportunity to thrive or fail. Main argues that New England gave women a new economic opportunity where they could work within the town without gender discrimination, which contrasts with Norton’s belief that colonial America limited women of all backgrounds as most historians look selectively at white women instead of looking at the lives of all females. Out of both arguments I support Norton’s argument because she looked at the lives of all women within colonial America as focusing on one spot could lead to a bias in the conclusions made, and she looked at each aspect where women were involved in society, like marriage, economics, and social relations. I believe that women “had won a little liberty” in coming to America, but with America already being populated by a lot of men it led to a loss of opportunity as they were not at the center of colonial society (47).